

WHY LYING IS ALWAYS WRONG: THE UNIQUENESS OF VERBAL DECEIT

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I think it is always wrong to lie (to state what one knows is not true). But my friend John Frame and a number of other theologians make exceptions in extreme cases, such as in war and to save life. The debate includes the classic moral dilemma that arises in the case where Nazi soldiers come to your door, asking whether you are hiding Jews.

Recently Wayne Grudem argued in favor of never lying in the festschrift to John Frame; and Frame responded briefly in the same festschrift.¹ This exchange builds on earlier work by John Murray and John Frame.² Taken together, these writings lay out the arguments on both sides. Neither side has succeeded in presenting an argument that would convince everyone on the other side. Frame indicates that he has “gone back and forth several times”³ on the issue, which illustrates the difficulty. Is there anything more to be said?

The arguments in favor of lying in exceptional cases include three prongs, which focus respectively on normative, existential, and situational aspects of the issue. I myself think that together these prongs have plausibility. Like Wayne Grudem, I want to stress that I respect John Frame and others who allow exceptions. And yet they have not convinced me. Why not?

I. *Scriptural Instruction*

The normative prong in favor of exceptions includes positive instances of deceit in Scripture, and the negative observation that nowhere does Scripture directly and clearly prohibit all lying whatsoever. Cases of lying naturally fall

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¹ Wayne A. Grudem, “Why It Is Never Right to Lie: An Example of John Frame’s Influence on My Approach to Ethics,” in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame* (ed. John J. Hughes; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009), 778-801; John Frame’s response is found in “Responses to Some Articles,” in *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 973-74.

² John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 123-48; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 830-43. The discussion of possible exceptions is found in *ibid.*, 834-40. Augustine and Calvin are earlier representatives of Grudem’s position, which is similar to John Murray’s.

³ Frame, “Responses,” 973.

under the Ninth Commandment, which says, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod 20:16). At its heart the Ninth Commandment focuses on false testimony in court, which is clearly a situation where telling only the truth is mandated. But what about the many other situations in which we find ourselves? Ephesians 4:25 says, “Let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.” This commandment is much broader in scope, but still focuses on fellow Christians, who are “members one of another.” Other verses are more general: “You destroy those who *speak lies*” (Ps 5:6); “*lying lips* are an abomination to the LORD” (Prov 12:22). Grudem lists many other verses that condemn lying,⁴ but his opponents may argue that these verses address the same situations covered by the Ninth Commandment and Eph 4:25. That is, they concern saying things that help rather than hurt our neighbors.

Nevertheless, concern for truth extends beyond the needs of neighbors. God is a God of truth. Truth is central to God’s character, as well as to his communication with us. God “never lies” (Titus 1:2; cf. Num 23:19). Christ is the truth (John 14:6). God’s word is truth (John 17:17). In addition, we are to be imitators of God and imitators of Christ (Eph 5:1; 1 Cor 11:1; 1 Pet 2:21). This kind of imitation follows both from our being created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27; 1 Cor 11:7) and from our being redemptively renewed in the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:13, 22-24).⁵ Thus, at its root Christian life favors truth and stands against lying. This observation by itself might be enough to convince many, were it not for the apparent counterexamples in the Bible and the moral dilemmas that may arise in people’s lives. We will consider the counterexamples and dilemmas gradually in connection with other arguments.

II. *Motives*

We have looked briefly at the normative perspective on lying and truth telling. Now consider the existential perspective, which focuses on persons and their motives. For those who permit lying in extreme cases, the existential prong is, I believe, the strongest. It starts by correctly observing that misleading others is an appropriate, godly response in some unusual cases, where the people being misled are opponents of God. Misleading them is part of a process whereby the godly try to prevent the wicked from carrying out their godless plans. One classic case occurred when God instructed Joshua to “lay an ambush” during his second attack on Ai (Josh 8:2). The next day “Joshua and all Israel pretended to be beaten before them” (Josh 8:15).

⁴ Grudem, “Why It Is Never Right to Lie,” 784-86; so also Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, throughout pp. 123-48.

⁵ So also Grudem, “Why It Is Never Right to Lie,” 788-90; Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 124-25.

At this point, most people who permit lying treat verbal acts and physical activities under the same head. Both verbal acts of lying and military feints mislead. What is the difference? The two kinds of acts have similar motives. In addition, if they are successful, they have similar results—they succeed in misleading and the plans of the wicked fail. This similarity between verbal and nonverbal acts is simultaneously the strong point and the weak point. It is a strong point because, if the two kinds of action are indeed equivalent, the case for lying as a form of misleading the wicked is established. But if the two kinds of approach are not equivalent, the case for lying is weakened.

III. *Uniqueness of Verbal Action*

I do not think they are equivalent. But why? It is not easy to say. Grudem and Murray make the same distinction that I do between verbal and nonverbal action.⁶ As an illustration, Grudem describes a situation in which he leaves a light on in his house when he goes on a trip. He intends to mislead thieves, but he is not lying. If a friend sees the light on, he may infer that Grudem is at home. Yet if he later learns that Grudem is in another city, he will take no offense. He knows that he just misinterpreted the meaning of the light. If, however, Grudem tells him that he will be at home, the friend can legitimately hold Grudem to his word.⁷ Verbal communication is different from leaving a light on or setting an ambush or feigning a retreat. It is different from a maneuver in sports in which the player with the ball fakes going in one direction in order to draw the defender that way, and then changes course to another direction.

So what is different? When no words are involved, physical actions have to be interpreted. They are potentially multivalent in meaning.⁸ Does the action of a player charging in one direction mean that he will continue to go in that direction? Maybe, but maybe not. A skilled opponent knows that the player may change direction, perhaps multiple times. Does an army moving back from battle engagement indicate a genuine retreat? Or is it something else? Who knows? The “obvious” interpretation may lie in one direction. But the interpreter must make the decision, and it is *his* decision, not a decision “dictated” by some intrinsic, inalienable meaning in the physical action itself.

Words and utterances need interpretation too. But the interpretation is constrained by the regularities of language, the regularities in the meaning of words, and the regularities of personal communication. Statements can be true or false; by contrast, a football maneuver or a military maneuver is neither

⁶ Murray, however, is not completely clear: “Truthfulness is concerned not only with words, but also with other forms of signification” (*Principles of Conduct*, 144). What does he mean by “signification”? Is it merely verbal communication in an alternate mode—sign language or Morse code or a speechless person pointing to the word “yes” or “no” on a communication board? Or does it include in addition the “significance” of a military feint?

⁷ Grudem, “Why It Is Never Right to Lie,” 794.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 781, 794.

true nor false. The maneuver does not *say* anything, except to the extent that an interpreter reads in some significance and concludes that it “says” in a metaphorically extended sense that the participant has a particular purpose. Truth is not the issue in nonverbal actions.

We can perhaps further explain the difference by observing that verbal communication has what the linguists have called *double articulation*. Words have both meaning and sound (or, in written form, meaning and spelling). Except for a few onomatopoeic words like *meow*, the sound has no obvious relation to the meaning. The sounds do not have an ordinary use by themselves, independent of a second layer of articulate meaning. By contrast, physical actions of moving or dribbling a ball have a certain physical meaning even before they are incorporated into a battle or a game. This presence of an underlying, first-order meaning to physical motions results in a situation in which any second-order meaning, such as attacking, feigning, retreating, and so on, exists in the presence of other possible human purposes, for battles or for gaming. Verbal communication, by contrast, has a meaning largely fixed by the divinely ordained regularities of communication, to which words and their meanings belong intrinsically.

We must still be careful, because the context of words and sentences can make a lot of difference. We must be ready to discern irony and metaphor. We must pay attention to genre. Sometimes the kind of communication being made is not clear—as when we start listening to a speaker when he is halfway through a joke, and we do not recognize that it is a joke.

Granted the complexities, it is still true that speakers make ethical commitments by speaking. These commitments are quasi-covenantal, in that they are analogous to the more solemn and formal commitments sealed by covenant-making.⁹ For example, speakers commit themselves by making assertions, which they maintain are true. Or they make commands or requests that they think are consistent with their social status and that they tacitly imply will be good for others to follow. They make promises, and when they do they are bound to keep them.

An unusual human situation can indeed qualify or color the nature of the commitments. People make promises with the tacit understanding, “if I continue to live long enough and have physical ability to fulfill my promise.” Yet it is difficult to see how an unusual situation can give us a “get-out-of-jail-free card” that magically cancels the covenantal obligations that are built into the use of language.

⁹ Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 36-39. Social situations involve quasi-covenantal obligations, even when no words pass between the participants. We are obligated if, Samaritan-like, we see a wounded man by the roadside. If I hand a credit card to the cashier, I imply by my gesture that I have authority to do so; I and not the cashier will be held guilty if the transaction is done with a fraudulent card. But outside of stereotyped contexts like credit-card purchases, a nonverbal context constrains the meaning much less than verbally articulated commitment.

Thus, I suggest that verbal deceit and so-called “deceit” through nonverbal action are not morally equivalent. They can nevertheless *seem* to be equivalent, if a person reduces moral judgment to matters of motive, and in addition treats motives in isolation from the way in which the motives are expressed—in speech or in some other way. In effect, the person claims that since the motives are the same, the moral values of the resulting actions are the same. But this appeal to common motives begs the question of whether the motives can be isolated from the ways used to express them, or whether instead they are inextricably entangled with their expression.

Let me put it another way. Choosing to use words is a responsible choice. A person’s bad moral choice with words cannot be justified merely by pointing out that “he is sincere” or that “he means well.” We as fellow humans ought to sympathize fully with good motives, and yet still be able to observe that people with more-or-less good motives can choose less-than-wise means in execution.

Situations of military conflict in the Bible confirm rather than undermine the intuition that verbal communication has a unique character. For example, Jehoshaphat gives a speech trying to dissuade Amaziah from entering into battle (2 Kgs 14:9-10). The speech can only hope to persuade Amaziah if the latter perceives it as a genuine communication rather than a fake. Similarly, the Rabshakeh makes a speech as part of the military encounter between the Assyrian army and Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:19-35). A letter comes to Hezekiah later with a similar thrust (2 Kgs 19:14). Both messages rely on normal covenantal speech commitments, even in the midst of a highly charged military conflict. In a similar way, Jesus speaks of a king who seeks terms of peace (Luke 14:32), and of a legal accuser and defendant who discuss terms on the way to court (Matt 5:25-26; Luke 12:58-59). Military conflict, legal conflict, and potential battles—situations of extreme alienation—sit right alongside speech that can be completely truthful.

Of course wartime speeches to enemies have complexities, just as there are complexities in ordinary situations. Sinful human beings may lie in the midst of a war parley, just as they may lie to their friends. In particular, Rabshakeh’s speech attacks faith in God, and so it is not to be trusted. My point is that these speeches are possible and that they have a chance of being convincing because God has ordained regular patterns for human verbal communication, and he has ordained the moral obligations that go with them. The human participants have tacit knowledge of these regular patterns and obligations when they participate in a war parley. The moral obligations for verbal truthfulness are still in place, even in the midst of war.

We should also mention two passages where God himself undertakes to bring people into confusion: 1 Kgs 22:19-23 and 2 Thess 2:11. Both cases describe situations in which the confusion has complex origins. Confusion does not take place through words that God speaks to human beings, either directly in theophany or indirectly through a true prophet. Rather, God *ordains* that human beings become captive to deceit, either through “a lying spirit in the mouth of

all his prophets" (1 Kgs 22:22) or through Satanic deception (2 Thess 2:9-10). Both passages are consistent with the principle that God himself speaks only truth ("never lies," Titus 1:2). Indeed, the passages build on the fact that (1) God's instruction to the spirit in 1 Kgs 22 is true; (2) Ahab and the false prophets deserve judgment because they reject the true word of the Lord to them through Micaiah; and (3) the unbelievers in 2 Thess 2:9-12 are condemned because they "refused to love the truth" (v. 10) and "did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (v. 12). In both passages the speech of God—which is wholly truthful—has a central role. These passages, understood from the perspective of God's speech, affirm the importance of truth. I suggest, then, that these passages can be enlisted on the other side of the argument only if verbal untruth and nonverbal ways of misleading are seen as necessarily equivalent.

God's judgment at the consummation of history also confirms the role of truth. The books are opened, revealing works good and bad (Rev 20:12-13). The books testify to the truth about each person's life. And when God pronounces judgment, his judgment is true (John 8:16). It is sometimes suggested that if the wicked have hardened themselves in wickedness, they no longer deserve the truth, and it may be impossible to say anything that helps them. Perhaps, but silence is one possible response to wickedness (2 Kgs 18:36; Matt 26:63; Mark 14:61). Moreover, though wickedness may make further *human* communication difficult, it does not mean an end to divine communication of truth—pure truth. The terror of condemnation by God is not that he no longer has anything to say, but precisely that he does say something devastating: words of condemnation, words of purest truth that the wicked detest but that they nevertheless cannot evade and cannot suppress. Thus, it seems impossible to show by means of a general argument that extreme wickedness gives us allowance to deviate from truth.

Might we find an exception to truth telling on the basis of Meredith G. Kline's theory of intrusion? Kline put forward the thesis that "intrusion," that is, typological anticipations of the consummation, may affect the relevance of ethical precepts.¹⁰ This thesis makes some sense with respect to the conquest of Canaan.¹¹ So does a case of intrusion relax the principle of not lying? Kline himself notes that certain ethical principles are based on "the nature of God," and these cannot be abolished.¹² Because God is truthful by nature, the principle of not lying is one such permanent principle. In addition, since the consummation represents the consummate manifestation of God's truth, earlier "intrusions" should by analogy manifest truth, not lies.

¹⁰ Meredith G. Kline, "Intrusion and the Decalogue," *WTJ* 16 (1953) 1-22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

IV. *Truth That Refrains from Telling Everything*

What about “partial truth”? The modern courtroom asks the witness to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” It is a solemn pledge, appropriate to a courtroom that needs all kinds of pertinent facts to come to light. But the expression “the whole truth” is not appropriate for human communication in general. Scripture forbids gossip (Rom 1:29; 2 Cor 12:20; 1 Tim 5:13). “Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered” (Prov 11:13). The same principle applies when communicating with a wicked person. One avoids saying things that will be misused.

We find a good example when the Lord sent Samuel to anoint David as king. According to 1 Sam 16:2, Samuel feared that Saul would find out about it and kill him. The Lord said to Samuel, “Say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.’” Samuel did say that (1 Sam 16:5). Of course, Samuel did not indicate *all* the reasons why he came to Bethlehem. He could have said more. But silence about the other purposes is not lying. What Samuel said was true. Nothing obliged Samuel to provide further information—especially information that, if it became known, might induce Saul to murderous action.¹³

The situation in 2 Kgs 6:19 is only a little more difficult. Elisha says to the Syrian army, “This is not the way, and this is not the city.” That pair of statements is not a direct answer to a question from the king for specific direction. Both clauses are vague. The way to what? What city? In terms of covenantal responsibility, the speaker cannot be held responsible for a more definite statement than what he in fact gives. The clearest thing that Elisha says then follows: “Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.” Elisha here gives a promise, and he does in fact fulfill the promise. The army does get to meet Elisha, though not in the circumstances that they originally planned. “The way” turns out to be the Lord’s way rather than theirs, and “the city” turns out to be both the city in which the man of God is present and the city in which the king of Syria and his troops must come to grips with their own inadequacy, the Lord’s power, and the Lord’s mercy. It is indeed for them “the city” in a crucial way, but also in a surprising way.¹⁴

Consider now Jer 38:24-27. King Zedekiah told Jeremiah what to say to “the officials,” and Jeremiah followed the king’s instructions. By doing so, he did not give them the whole truth. The passage has two main complexities. First, though Jeremiah was a prophet, it is not clear that he was acting in his capacity as a prophet, rather than simply in his capacity as a private individual, when he replied to the officials. If the latter was the case, we cannot conclude that God approves completely of the way Jeremiah talked himself out of the

¹³ “It is necessary to guard jealously the distinction between partial truth and untruth” (Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 140).

¹⁴ Similarly Grudem, “Why It Is Never Right to Lie,” 793-94.

confrontation. Second, the text contains a sparse account of the meeting between Zechariah and Jeremiah. It does not mention one way or another whether Zechariah and Jeremiah discussed—perhaps even at length—whether Zechariah would send Jeremiah back to the house of Jonathan (compare Jer 37:18-20). Even if they did not discuss this issue at length, they did discuss it—because Zechariah himself brought up the subject in order to provide Jeremiah with an excuse. It may then be the case that Jeremiah told the officials the truth, but not the whole truth. That is, he told them about one issue that he had discussed with Zechariah, but not all the issues. The officials may or may not have pressed Jeremiah by specifically enjoining him to “hide nothing from us” (Jer 38:25). Without an extended record of the conversation between Jeremiah and the officials, we cannot draw a confident conclusion. This case is a weak one for those who defend lying.

V. *Taking into Account the Situation*

The final prong in the issue of lying is the situational prong. Those who permit lying describe situations in which a lie seems to lead to good results. Here we must be careful. The mere attraction of a possible good outcome is not sufficient to ground a moral argument. The ends do not justify the means. God does not permit us to “do evil that good may come” (Rom 3:8). The advocate of lying may say that the issue is precisely whether lying is evil in all cases. Yes. But an argument that depends wholly on looking at good results, if unsupported by other buttresses, is quite weak. It is weak also because, without exhaustive knowledge of a situation, knowledge that only God has, we cannot say for sure that there are no good alternatives to lying.

God promises us that, in any trial, he will provide a way of escape: “but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13). We can take as an example a situation that actually involved Nazi soldiers. In the days when Holland was occupied by the Nazis, two of Corrie ten Boom’s Dutch nephews burst into the house because they were being sought for by the Germans to work in the German munitions factories. The family hid them in a hole under the kitchen floor, a hole used as a potato cellar. A rug lay over the trapdoor, with the kitchen table over the rug. Now comes the confrontation:

There was a crash in the hall as the front door burst open and a smaller crash close by as Cocky [Corrie ten Boom’s niece] dropped a teacup. Two uniformed Germans ran into the kitchen, rifles leveled.

“Stay where you are. Do not move.”

We heard boots storming up the stairs. The soldiers glanced around disgustingly at this room filled with women and one old man. If they had looked closer at Katrien she would surely have given herself away: her face was a mask of terror. But they had other things on their minds.

“Where are your men?” the shorter soldier asked Cocky in clumsy, thick-accented Dutch.

“These are my aunts,” she said, “and this is my grandfather. My father is at his school, and my mother is shopping, and—”

“I didn’t ask about the whole tribe!” the man exploded in German. Then in Dutch: “Where are your brothers?”

Cocky stared at him a second, then dropped her eyes. My heart stood still. I knew how Nollie had trained her children—but surely, surely of all times a lie was permissible!

“Do you have brothers?” the officer asked again.

“Yes,” Cocky said softly. “We have three.”

“How old are they?”

“Twenty-one, nineteen, and eighteen.”

Upstairs we heard the sounds of doors opening and shutting, the scrape of furniture dragged from walls.

“Where are they now?” the soldier persisted.

Cocky leaned down and began gathering up the broken bits of cup. The man jerked her upright. “Where are your brothers?”

“The oldest one is at the Theological College. He doesn’t get home most nights because—”

“What about the other two?”

Cocky did not miss a breath.

“Why, they’re under the table.”

Motioning us all away from it with his gun, the soldier seized a corner of the cloth. At a nod from him the taller man crouched with his rifle cocked. Then he flung back the cloth.

At last the pent-up tension exploded: Cocky burst into spasms of high hysterical laughter. The soldiers whirled around. Was this girl laughing at them?

“Don’t take us for fools!” the short one snarled. Furiously he strode from the room and minutes later the entire squad trooped out—not, unfortunately, before the silent soldier had spied and pocketed our precious packet of tea.

It was a strange dinner party that evening, veering as it did from heartfelt thanksgiving to the nearest thing to a bitter argument our close-knit family had ever had. Nollie stuck by Cocky, insisting she would have answered the same way. “God honors truth-telling with perfect protection!”

Peter and Bob [the nephews], from the viewpoint of the trapdoor, weren’t so sure. And neither was I. I had never had Nollie’s bravery—no nor her faith either. But I could spot illogic. “And it isn’t logical to *say* the truth and *do* a lie! What about Annaliese’s false papers—and that maid’s uniform on Katrien?”

“Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth,” Nollie quoted, “Keep the door of my lips.’ Psalm One Hundred Forty-one!” she finished triumphantly. . . .

Love. How did one show it? How could God Himself show truth and love at the same time in a world like this?

By dying. The answer stood out for me sharper and chiller than it ever had before that night: the shape of a Cross etched on the history of the world.¹⁵

¹⁵ Corrie ten Boom with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts, 1971), 87-88.

Corrie ten Boom and her relatives struggled over how to respond to the oppression that they encountered. Not all agreed with what Cocky had done. Should Cocky have remained silent and refused to give answers even to the earlier questions? Should she have told a lie? Their debates mirror the debates that we still hold today, within situations less threatening than theirs. It sounds as if Corrie could not see a difference between untruth in words and deceit in action (“illogic”). On the other hand, Nollie and her daughter Cocky did see a difference. There is the debate. Jesus is our sympathetic high priest, who understands these struggles (Heb 4:15).¹⁶

The situation with Cocky involved special circumstances. The advocates of lying may always choose to say that Cocky was naive or over-scrupulous, and that God was merciful to her naiveté. But that argument cuts both ways. Who is naive? Is it Cocky or is it the person who does not trust that God can provide a way out for those who refuse to say untruth? The advice to trust in the Lord emphasizes trust rather than one’s “own understanding”:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths. (Prov 3:5-6)

Can we generalize from the example with Cocky? Can there be a general recipe for dealing with Nazi soldiers? I am not sure that there can. In the Olivet Discourse Jesus promises special aid to those who need words:

And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. (Mark 13:11)

But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. (Luke 21:12-16)

In both Mark and Luke, Jesus describes a situation where Christians are on trial for their faith.¹⁷ Admittedly it is not exactly the same situation as when Nazi soldiers arrive at the door. And yet the two are akin. Both involve response to governmental authorities. And when the Nazis come, a Christian is figuratively speaking on trial with respect to whether he will continue in the

¹⁶ Frame wisely commends the heroism in such situations (*Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 840). Our hearts go out to the brave, however they choose to respond to supremely difficult situations.

¹⁷ Jesus’ promise may be focused on the apostles and their close associates. Even if this is so, the principle still applies by analogy to all Christians.

Christian way or give in to the pressure from government. If we are in such a situation, it is wise to pray that God will give us an answer, even on the spot (“not to meditate beforehand how to answer”). Each situation may call for its own creative response.

But people can still have the feeling that there is no way out. In reply, let me at least suggest that in some circumstances one might take the initiative in conversation. The manner of taking initiative is even suggested by what Jesus says about “your opportunity to bear witness” (Luke 21:13). Suppose one says to the Nazis,

Come on in. I want to talk to you. I know you may be just trying to do your duty. But I am a follower of Christ, and I believe that God’s standards judge every human government. What the government is doing to the Jews is wrong. But even more important than that is the good news that God sent, that Jesus Christ can deliver us from the wrongs we have done. If, however, we refuse his deliverance, we have to face his judgment. And that includes all the people who have a role in government. Do you believe in God? Do you know what his moral standards are?

In effect, we try to do what Paul probably did in Acts 24:25. We engage them with the gospel. Soldiers and police are not *merely* faceless agents of the government. They are human beings to whom we can bring the good news of salvation.¹⁸ And this good news, which addresses the issue of the eternal destiny of the soul, is more important even than the preservation of human life, including our own.

If soldiers or police insist on simply returning to their original question, one might say,

Can you understand that I accept the legitimate authority of human government, but I cannot cooperate in evil? If I were harboring Jews, would I tell you? You ought not to be asking about the Jews, but asking instead about how to be reconciled to the God who made you.

I am not of course saying that this is the only way to answer, but it is one possible way. Maybe it will result in being carried off to prison and to death. Maybe it will result in the house being continually searched, so that it is not in fact a good place to hide Jews. But the house becomes a good place to witness to Nazis. Every time they come to conduct a search, one can follow them around, or at least

¹⁸ I thus have difficulty with the way that John Frame develops the principle that we are “forbidden to lie because of a relationship,” specifically “a neighborly relationship” (Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 839). To be sure, a relationship to an enemy is a highly strained relationship. The thief or murderer on the road to Jericho does not have the same relationship to us as a wounded man lying by the roadside. But we still have a human relationship of a broader kind, with many potential dimensions. Frame uses Luke 10:25-37 to define a neighbor as “anyone we find to be in need” (ibid., 835). Even the enemy is “in need” of the gospel. So Frame’s attempt to define only some people as neighbors breaks down, precisely when it comes to communicating the most important truths.

talk to the one who is left behind to watch. They become a captive audience, in a way similar to how the soldier guarding Paul became a captive audience for the gospel. If one is imprisoned, as Corrie ten Boom and her sister were, one witnesses to the other prisoners and to the guards, as one has opportunity.

VI. *The Classic Cases of Lying*

In this connection we can take up some of the classic cases: the Hebrew midwives in Exod 1 and Rahab in Josh 2. Scripture commends both the midwives and Rahab (Exod 1:17, 20-21; Heb 11:31). Both are outstanding examples because they refused to follow the ways of powerful overlords. Rahab made a break with the whole society and religion of Jericho. Both the midwives and Rahab offer us examples of faith in God.

But the commendations found in the Bible do not necessarily imply that no sin existed in the details. We know that Christians should do good works, and that God is pleased with our good works (Luke 19:17; 2 Cor 5:9; 2 Thess 2:4; 4:1). Yet that does not mean that the good works are absolutely flawless. God approves them, not because they are flawless, but because, by our union with Christ, our flaws are covered. Similarly, the flaws of the midwives and of Rahab were covered. We do not know the details of their situations, nor do we know the thoughts of their hearts, which only God knows. Without this knowledge it is hazardous to venture a detailed evaluation.¹⁹

Since, however, the proponents of lying sometimes suppose that they may press these cases to their advantage, let me venture at least to show that there may be other possibilities. Grudem shows that it is possible that what the midwives said might have been “true as a generalization.”²⁰ We do not know all the circumstances. But supposing for the sake of argument that they did lie, their case is similar to Rahab. So let us consider her.

Rahab did lie (Josh 2:4-5). Was there any alternative? Could the midwives and Rahab have preached the gospel to Pharaoh and to the inhabitants of Jericho, respectively? The gospel centers on the crucifixion, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of Christ, none of which was as clearly known in the OT as now. Old Testament deliverances like the deliverance of Noah from the flood or Joseph from prison or the Israelites from the Red Sea foreshadow our deliverance from spiritual death through union with Christ. In OT times people believed on Christ by believing in God’s promises pointing forward to Christ. So the gospel was in a sense already present in the OT. On some occasions in the OT we do see Gentiles coming to believe in the God of Israel:

¹⁹ Similarly Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 138-39.

²⁰ Grudem, “Why It Is Never Right to Lie,” 792; so also Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 141. For example, it is possible that the work of Hebrew women as slaves made them on the average physically stronger and better prepared for the exertions of childbirth than pampered women in Pharaoh’s court. It is also possible that the midwives often delayed coming in hopes that the pregnant woman would already have given birth and the midwives would have an excuse.

one thinks of Ruth and Naaman. In addition, Rahab was saved. And through Rahab some of her relatives were physically saved (Josh 6:23). Could even the messengers of the king of Jericho have been saved if Rahab had tried to persuade them as she may have persuaded some relatives? We do not know.

What we do know is that the time of waiting in the OT, and the time when saving truth was largely restricted to Israel, is now over. Dare we withhold the gospel from Nazis whose actions show that they desperately need it? “Love your enemies” (Matt 5:44). Loving them can mean speaking the truth that is all important, even at the cost of one’s own bodily life. There are things that are more important than life.

Psalm 63:3 will not go out of my mind: “Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.” God’s steadfast love is better than life. Can we say that the truth about God’s steadfast love is better than life? Jesus testified to the importance of truth at a crucial moment, when he was before Pilate: “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to *the truth*” (John 18:37). He gave the truth to Pilate, who did not deserve it. He gave the truth to the Sanhedrin, who did not deserve it (Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62). He exhibited in his own person that he believed that the steadfast love of the Lord was better than life, and speaking the truth more important than life.

The proponents of exceptions may of course claim that the case of Jesus was an extreme exception. He came to die. Yes, it was exceptional. And yet “we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 John 3:16). When the Nazis come, what is at stake is not only our life but the lives of those we may be hiding. Yes. But, especially in this extreme situation, I want to raise the question of whether truth is more important than *anyone’s* life. If the Lord tarries, we will all die physically—some sooner, some later. The Sixth Commandment teaches us to value human life. But life in this world, valuable as it is, is not everlasting. Our life, what is it? “For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (Jas 4:14). By contrast, the truth abides forever (Matt 24:35).