

Resolving Moral Conflicts, II

Let us pray.

Lord, open our eyes that we may behold wondrous things out of Your Law. Lead us forth in Your truth and teach us, for You are our God and our hope is in You. Help us, especially, we pray, with the difficult situations that we face that we may understand how to apply Your Word faithfully, that we may seek Your face in all these decisions, and be with us to that end for Jesus' sake. Amen.

In the last session we started this area of the resolution of moral conflicts. I was going through a number of methods. We want to be careful not to undermine our ethic while adopting a method. Sometimes we come out at the same place in terms of a particular decision, such as the way we evaluate the villagers of Le Chambon in their protection of Jews during the occupation of France. But then in retrospect, the way in which that is justified tends to be very different. We looked last time at consequentialism, which in fact reduces conflict by maintaining that there is only one absolute principle for the greater balance of good over evil in every situation. And we saw how that led to subjectivism—how it is really a principle for tyrants. The 20th century is filled with millions of lives that have been murdered in pursuit of an ideal on the grounds that the end justifies the means. So cruelty for the time being was argued, as we bring in the new humanity, to have been justified. Terrible, terrible deeds have been done under that principle.

The next approach, what I call tragic morality, has been adopted by some evangelical Christians who reject consequentialism, who see the dangers in that. But they understand that in a fallen world, God's absolutes come into conflict and when they do, we choose the lesser of two evils. Although, we are still responsible for the evil that we have chosen and therefore must confess our sins.

Norman Geisler is the one largely associated with this third principle of hierarchicalism. He is a prominent evangelical theologian. He is a philosopher, and his specialty is apologetics, philosophy, and religion. He has written a lot in that area, but he has also written on ethics. He adopts the view called hierarchicalism. He agrees with evangelicals of the tragic morality type that God's absolutes do come into conflict, but he has a particular theory about the way in which they are resolved so that we are not held guilty when we obey a higher absolute and disobey a lower absolute. In his view, these are absolute moral duties, God's absolute commands. His position may be simply expressed by saying, "When two moral duties clash, the believer is exempt from his duty to the lower by virtue of his obedience to the higher." So we are exempt from the lesser evil in this case, to use the language of moral choice, and so we do not sin in doing that but are doing the right thing. Geisler posits a system of graded absolutes in which God's commands, all of which are moral and absolute, are arranged hierarchically so that in cases of conflict the higher exempts from the lower. In one example that he gives, he makes a big point of distinguishing between an exemption and an exception. He says, "When one kills another human being in self-defense, he is exempt from guilt," citing Exodus 22:2. "Yet there is no exception made to the Law which requires us to always treat another human being, even a would-be murderer, as a human being with intrinsic value." That is not the precise question. Even within that sphere, there is something that he obscures. The issue is what kind of an act is it to act in self-defense and does the Bible approve that act.

I have three difficulties with Geisler's hierarchicalism. The first problem, as I see it, is the imposition upon Scripture of a preconceived definition of a moral absolute. All God's commands, He says, are absolute because they all derive from the holy nature of God. We saw earlier that we have to make some

distinctions with respect to God's commands. Some do indeed derive from the holy nature of God. It could not be otherwise that God would command cruelty. That is not His nature. God is love; therefore, His commandments must embody love. Other commandments, we understand, are derived from the will of God for human beings whom He created in His image in this life so that the norms for marriage and so forth derive from His will. There is another category that derives from God's positive will, which is the ceremonial law that is His temporary regulations for His people, including the dietary laws. Those commandments are not absolute. They could be overridden by the commandments to preserve life. We saw that in the instance of David when he was given permission to eat the showbread which was, strictly speaking, only lawful for the priests to eat. It was not God's purpose in giving that commandment for it to be interpreted so absolutely that it cannot be relieved for the preservation of human life. Geisler says that the commandment not to eat the showbread was just as absolute as the commandment not to commit murder. Well, I think that we need to distinguish between the commands of God and this preconceived definition of a moral absolute; that, I have, as my first difficulty. This moral absolute, in Geisler's system, has to be qualified by a questionable distinction between an exception and exemption. You see, he insists that the absolute that is overridden is still an absolute. But when it comes down to it, he talks about them being relative absolutes. I think that is a contradiction in terms. If one absolute preempts another absolute, the absolute that is preempted is no longer absolute. It is qualified by its place in that hierarchy. And although Geisler insists that they are still absolute, I think that the distinction between an exception and an exemption is a verbal solution.

On the issue of the taking of human life and the way he interprets self-defense, the precise issue is whether God has absolutely forbidden the taking away of human life under all circumstances. It is often assumed that that is the absolute that God has absolutely forbidden—the taking away of human life under all circumstances. But if God has not absolutely forbidden that then there is no conflict of absolutes in the kind of case Geisler mentions. I suggest that we think of the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." If we state that in terms of an absolute, this would be the proper way of putting it: human life is sacred to God and may never be taken away without divine warrant. Then we know that there are exceptional circumstances in which God warrants the taking away of human life. They are not exceptions to an absolute. The absolute includes the idea of divine warrant. And where God has given warrant, those so-called exceptions really serve to define what the absolute is. If we state the universal norm this way: God forbids the taking away of human life, except in the case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense as our catechism does, these are not stating exceptions to an absolute or exemptions within the absolute. They are defining the absolute in such a way as to require the burden of proof that the taking away of human life has divine authority. I think if we work carefully and state what the absolute is—that human life is sacred to God and may never be taken away without divine warrant—then you have a universal principle. The only question then is to search the Scriptures to find out when human life is warranted by God to be taken. That, to me, solves the problem with Abraham and Isaac.

It runs through the literature that Abraham broke an absolute when he offered Isaac upon the altar, at least in terms of his intention, although God only let it proceed as far as the binding of Isaac. If we take the principle that human life is sacred to God and may never be taken without divine warrant, it was warranted in that instance. Isaac was a guilty sinner before God whose life was forfeit to God. God, for His purposes, makes it clear that mere human sacrifice of a sinner cannot avail for substitution, but only God Himself can be the sacrifice. The Lord will Himself provide a sacrifice, and that is why the place is called, "in the mountain of the Lord it will be provided." So, there is a redemptive, historical purpose that God has in showing that principle. The binding of Isaac is an absolutely unique case in Scripture for a particular purpose and would be very pedantic to always include that in our definition of how we define the absolute. It is sufficient to say human life is sacred to God and may never be taken without divine warrant. In that one instance, God did warrant Abraham from proceeding as far as he did with the

taking of Isaac's life because God is sovereign over life and He had His lesson to present in that respect. It was not a conflict of absolutes if you properly state the absolute in terms of human life being sacred to God, never to be taken without divine warrant. That was a particular warrant that was unique to that situation.

The general warrant (when we give the sixth commandment we will give the biblical basis for it) is in the areas of lawful war (and we need to go over the criteria for what lawful war is), for public justice (we need to discuss the issue of applicable punishment and how it can be justly administered in a fallen world), and necessary defense (we need to think about how that bears on our lives as Christians). I think there is a better solution at hand than the appeal to the exemption from absolutes.

My second critique is the insistence that all God's commands are absolute. That creates many problems where none exist. A lot runs through the literature on this issue that one conflict of absolutes is God's command of obedience to the state and God's commands of obedience to Himself. That is not a conflict of absolutes. God has not commanded absolute obedience to the state. When the state commands something that God forbids, we only have one duty and that is to obey God rather than men. I think that one of the problems has been the tendency to find absolutes that go beyond the Scriptures. Our duty is to obey their lawful commands. That is very precise wording of our Shorter Catechism. Our responsibility as Christians is to obey their lawful commands. That is the absolute. What the Scriptures command that is lawful is to be respected and obeyed.

We will come back to the issue of civil disobedience after we have had a time to go over the biblical authority of the state. There is more to be said about that, and we need to make some distinctions between types of civil disobedience. I think that there are at least five different types of civil disobedience. Whether or not we judge them to be biblical depends upon analyzing the circumstances.

My third criticism is that as a method of resolving conflicts, which Geisler says is a conflict between absolutes, it is so open-ended that although he protests against this, I think that he ends up with little that cannot be done that would be done under situational ethics. For example, Geisler said, "There is really only one thing that is ultimate and absolute. That is love." So, that is the one indefeasible absolute, the one absolute from which there are no exemptions. The notion of an overriding, personal value is so broad that the conflict it is liable to create hardly admits of any limitation. If you arrange your moral absolutes in terms of a pyramid and the higher exempts from the lower, then what is at the top of the pyramid is really your only absolute—that is either love or to seek the most personal value. If we can be exempt from all the other commandments, all the other absolutes under that, then we have ended up with the same principle that there is no moral norm other than the law of love that may not be exempted under some circumstances. Although Geisler himself is a critic of situation ethics, I think it ends up ultimately not being able to hold its ground against that. I think we must look for some other way. Geisler's view has attracted a number of adherents by default. It gets out of the idea of tragic morality, and it seems to deal with these hard cases in a way. Be careful before you adopt that view because it tends to undermine the other commandments. If your only absolute is the overriding, personal value, almost anything can be justified on that basis. It just does not admit of any strict limitation, although Geisler is better than his principle would lead him to be. He would be much more conservative in application than Joseph Fletcher because the pull of Scripture is very strong in Geisler. However, in terms of a method, I think we have to question it.

There is a fourth view that I think moves in the right direction. It follows the lead of W. D. Ross, the British philosopher. Instead of talking about absolutes, Ross talks about *prima facie* duties. All the commandments would be *prima facie* duties, but our actual duty may be something different in those

situations. So rather than talk about absolutes he talks about prima facie duties, and our prima facie obligation may not be our actual obligation in a particular situation. This has been adopted by a number of evangelicals as well. There is a certain amount of truth to that. "You shall not kill" means there is a prima facie obligation not to take human life. We have to justify it, but we justify it on the basis of what God has warranted for the taking of human life. The way in which Ross works out prima facie duties is not clear as to how you distinguish between your actual duty and your prima facie duty. Moreover, another problem with it is that it wants to say that the prima facie duty continues as an unmet obligation. It is sort of bringing in tragic morality ideal, although it is not saying you are guilty for it. It is also trying to get that lower absolute that Geisler exempts from still in effect, and so the prima facie obligation always continues as an unmet obligation.

My friend, Stephen Mott, is an example. He taught social ethics at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary for most of his academic life. He applies this to civil disobedience. He says our prima facie duty is to obey the state, and in certain circumstances, it is right to disobey the state. However, civil disobedience is a wrong-making characteristic of that act. I think that that blurs the bright line between right and wrong. How can an act be right and still have wrong-making characteristics? I think we need to make a clear break. If it is right, it is right. Is there a way of approaching it in which we can resolve that particular issue? I think that there is, rather than following Ross.

We come finally to what I am calling case analysis. This is historically the way of resolution of moral conflicts. The term "casuistry" is used for this, but casuistry has gotten a bad name. In fact, the term casuistry (it is like sophistry) has a negative connotation from the beginning because it is rules for getting around the rules. That is the way a lot of casuistry has been. You figure out a way to morally justify sin, and of course, that is a liability for a human being. But we cannot escape dealing with cases of moral conflicts. I think we need to recover the legitimate understanding that lies behind the cases. We cannot recover the term "casuistry." I do not think it is possible to resuscitate it, but there are ethicists who are making a case for casuistry even as a term. We cannot escape the need to analyze cases. If the slogan of tragic morality is "choose the lesser of two evils" and the slogan of hierarchicalism is to "choose the higher absolute," the slogan of case analysis is "circumstances alter cases." They do not alter moral rules. They do not dispense with moral rules, which is consequentialism. The slogan of consequentialism would be "the end justifies the means." It is a very different thing to say that the end justifies the means and so I can virtually do anything as long as I have a good end. To say that circumstances alter cases does not deal away with rules, but it alters the moral understanding of the case that you are dealing with.

There are three things that we need to bear in mind as we proceed with case analysis as a way of dealing with moral conflicts. John Frame, who has had a parallel career at Westminster Seminary in ethics, was a fellow student of mine at Westminster when I was there. He is a good thinker, trained in philosophy, which makes him so precise in these areas. He has developed what he calls a "tri-perspectivalism," and I think that it is relevant. It is mostly relevant at the point of resolution of moral conflict. Of his tri-perspectives, his three perspectives, the first is the existential perspective. The existential perspective examines our heart and our character. Do we really want to know the will of God? That is the first question. Do we want to just bend the rules so that we can do what we want to do all along, or are we sincerely searching for the will of God? The first issue is to make sure our hearts are right in seeking to do the will of God. The villagers of Le Chambon were sincerely seeking the will of God. They wanted to do the right thing. They were used to habitual veracity (truthfulness), and so it pained them when it came to this situation of how to protect Jews under those emergency circumstances. So, there is, first of all, the existential perspective. We need to get our hearts right before the Lord or be sure they are sincerely seeking God's will.

Then there is the normative perspective. The way it is relevant here is that it is the whole teaching of Scripture that we bring to bear on the subject, not isolated texts. You can prove a lot of things by isolated texts. You can prove absolute obedience to the government from Romans 13. However, you have to compare Scripture with Scripture and ask what God's purpose is in giving His commands. There is a lot of hermeneutical process that goes into finding out what the will of God is. It cannot just be read off the surface of the biblical text. So, we first have to have our hearts right—that is the existential perspective. The normative perspective is that it is we have to take all of Scripture into account and look at it from that view.

Then I think there is the situational perspective that takes into account all the relevant facts. You need to take into account all the relevant facts in order to properly characterize a moral case. When this is done, when you take the whole teaching of Scripture and all the relevant facts in the case, a person whose heart is really seeking the will of the Lord can remove many of the perplexities that show up in the literature on conflict resolution. Let me give you some examples. First, one of the things that runs through the literature has to do with making vows. The Bible says when you make a vow, keep your vow. Edwin Lutzer, also another fine evangelical, was pastor of Moody Church. He had an academic career as well. He poses the example of a man vowing to kill another man. Now he is faced with a tragic choice. Either he must break his vow, which is sinful, or must he carry it out, which is sinful, and take the life of another human being. He is an advocate of the tragic moral choice. He says, "In this case, we hope that the man will not carry out his vow, that he will do the lesser sin and break his vow." But I think that this is not really a moral dilemma.

What is a vow in Scripture from the normative perspective? It is calling God to witness in order to strengthen your resolve to do something. God is not going to be made a party to sin. You cannot call on God to be your witness to carry out some sin. If you have made a vow to sin, there is only one right course of action and that is to repent for having made that sinful vow. That was worked out at the Reformation. It is in our confession that a vow cannot be obliged to sin. You just cannot do it. God will not be a part of it. I think that looking at the normative perspective is one of those areas that the dilemma is resolved when you think about what vowing is. Take the example of Herod. Salome dances before him, he is half drunk, he is pleased, and he says to the young woman, "Ask of me anything to half my kingdom and I will give it to you." And she goes and asks her mother, "Well, what should I ask? He promised to the half of his kingdom." She says, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist to be brought here on a platter." Well, what should Herod have done? He should obviously not have fulfilled that vow. He should have repented for his foolishness in making that kind of blanket promise in front of the people that were there and to persons who had evil intent on their mind. It is really not that difficult to see what he should have done. That example may illustrate the importance of the normative perspective of getting the whole teaching of Scripture, and when you do with respect to vows, that is no longer a moral dilemma.

On the situational perspective, I think that this illustration is to the point. I once wrote to the editor of *Christianity Today*. He had had an editorial called "Lying as the Lesser of Two Evils." He had defended the kind of thing that the villagers of Le Chambon had done on the basis that it was the lesser evil, but they were still guilty. I wrote to ask him some questions that I had. I received a letter that gave me this example: a man sees a terrorist throw a grenade into a group of women and children. The man falls on the grenade in order to save the lives of the crowd and in the process is killed himself. However, suicide is forbidden. What would I do with this kind of a case? Look at all the relevant facts of that situation. I think it is wrong to characterize it as a suicide. Given the facts of this case, you have to ask, "Is this kind of act forbidden by Scripture?" Obviously, it is not. "Greater love hath no man than this, than a man lay

down his life for his friends.” We are not forbidden to lay down our lives for other people. Rather than call that self-murder, which is what suicide means, it should be described as self-sacrifice. These things happen.

I was once teaching a Sunday school class on this material, and I saw in the class a man suddenly well up with tears. He did not seem to want to share that with the class. I saw him after class and he told me the reason that he was moved was that he was in the World War II, and he had a buddy who had actually done this. He had fallen on a grenade to save his colleagues. Miraculously, this person survived. He must have had some heavy-duty jacket or something or the grenade may have been partially a dud. But he bore the scars on his chest of having been willing to sacrifice his life for his friends. That was not suicide. When you know all the relevant facts in that case, this is not someone who is in despair over the war and takes this as a way out. This is an authentic self-sacrifice. I think when you look at the principle that we ought to look at the whole teaching of Scripture and know that circumstances alter cases, it yields us with the resolution of many of these conflicts. I think that the conflicts are multiplied in the literature in order to provide some analogy to the reasoning in the kind of falsehoods that were told during the Holocaust to protect Jews. I think that is the most difficult of these questions. It is the most intractable of these issues because the Bible places such a high premium on truthfulness. It is necessary for human community. Deceit is like violence and assault against the human person, and so it should have the caution that it does. Truth—the value of truth—has been very much derogated in our society. Therefore, we need to be very cautious in this area because “Zion is to be the city of truth. Speak truth to one another.” It is all over the Scriptures that that is our primary responsibility.

So, were the falsehoods justified under the circumstances? This is a question that has been mind-boggling since the early church with the Greek fathers taking one position and Augustine another. It has gone through the whole of history. Frame says, “Scripture assumes that in emergencies, normal regulations may be transcended in the interest of human health and safety.” He does not elaborate on that. But we are talking about an emergency situation where there is murderous intent on the part of people. How do we deal with a situation where you have that kind of radical breakdown in human relations? You are in an emergency situation! Well, I think that there are some things that we should bear in mind as we look at this. We are not talking about everyday life. We are talking about the abnormal conditions that prevail when we have murderers seeking information from us. Should we give it to them? Should we give them false information? The issue is how strict is the standard of truthfulness under these emergency circumstances?

I think we should go back to what we looked at earlier in terms of Jesus’ teaching on the weightier matters of the Law, which are justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Think of Le Chambon. Certainly what they did was in the interest of justice. It was not just for murderers to know the whereabouts of their intended victims. They were engaged in the unjust policy of extermination. The villagers of Chambon, in offering protection to the innocent, are clearly on the side of justice. And justice required at the very least that they not convey the information that would be useful to the enemies of the Jews whose purpose was to exterminate them. As a matter of justice, clearly they are on the right side. There is also an element of mercy. You see examples of this all over Europe, especially in this village. In February, The New York Times magazine ran an article on Germans in Germany who protected Jews during the Holocaust. The villagers in Chambon stand out because of their welcoming attitude that they had toward these people. They delighted in being merciful to them. And certainly, they are to be commended for that. Part of their showing mercy was not to reveal the truth to the authorities.

The one issue that might still remain is whether or not they are faithful in their use of language. I argue, with respect to this third weightier matter of the Law, that they were faithful in their use of language.

God has not given us human speech in order to allow it to be manipulated for the destruction of human beings. A murderer in search of an innocent victim has no right to expect truth from me. It is not being unfaithful to a murderer to tell him a falsehood. I think that that is the key here. If we look at the ninth commandment in terms of faithfulness in speech, you have to recognize that in this emergency situation with the breakdown of communication, it is not being unfaithful in the use of speech that God has given us to mislead or even falsify information for those who are seeking the lives of innocent people. We have an example here. I say these are emergency situations. We use the Holocaust. Also, under Soviet domination, you have the same patterns of police power in murderous intent for its victims. So it is broader than just the Holocaust. Those kinds of conditions prevail in various parts of the world at various times, especially in terms of secret police power. It even sometimes happens in everyday life. There was a story in the newspaper of an escaped convict. This was a local story of an escaped convict who broke into the house of a quadriplegic and asked him if he had any guns. The man said no. Well, the escapee searched the house and found that there were guns there. Can you imagine him bringing those guns to the poor man in the wheelchair and saying, "What kind of a person are you? You lied to me! You lied to me! Can you imagine how bad a person you are?" That is absurd, is it not? He has no right to expect truth. It is not unfaithful of him to say, "I do not have any guns" in the hopes that the convict would not find them and then precipitate a shootout. He took a great risk, but he did not help the convict. Either way, the man was helpless. As it turned out, he was then held hostage. Finally, the police persuaded the man to give up the weapons. That is an emergency circumstance. There is no unfaithfulness in speech in those circumstances.

There are a couple of biblical precedents that should give us comfort in these respects so that this is not just rationalizing on the basis of Scripture. This is, rather, looking at the whole of Scripture and its teaching. One thing that Scripture clearly sanctions is concealment of the truth for murderers. That is clear in 1 Samuel when Saul is on his rampage and he is broken with Samuel. Saul is apostate now and the Lord tells Samuel to go to Bethlehem because he has got somebody to anoint as the next king. And Samuel says, "I cannot do it, Lord. Saul will find out and kill me." And the Lord says, "You go and tell them that you have come to sacrifice at the house of Jesse, and I will show you who is the one to anoint." The Lord, in fact, gives him a cover story. It is true, but it does conceal. It conceals what is going on. It conceals the real intent of the visit because Saul has no right to that knowledge. Saul is murderous. He would have killed David, the young boy, and tried to kill him later, as you well know. It is the breakdown of communication that warrants this incident. So when Samuel comes to the village, the elders come out nervously and say, "Do you come in peace?"—in other words, You are not going to get us in trouble, are you?—"Samuel said, "Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord." So he puts them at ease, but it is a cover story. It is concealing the truth, and that was at God's command. So, at the very least, we recognize in that example a principle that murderers do not have a right to know the truth, and we have a right to conceal it, if we can.

There are two famous examples that bear on this topic that we should look at. The first is the Hebrew midwives in Exodus chapter 1, verses 15 and following. It says,

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah [forever immortalized because of their bravery], "When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt told them to do. They let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?" The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." So

God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

There are two questions there: was what the midwives told Pharaoh true or false? I think it was false. I think it was clearly false. Why would they need midwives if they gave birth this easily? Did the midwives just come to clean up the house after it was over? That is not likely. We know that Hebrew women suffered in childbirth, so the midwives are taking advantage of Pharaoh's cross-cultural ignorance; perhaps even of his sex education. We cannot prove it definitely, but what is the likelihood? Then, the second question is assuming that they did falsify their report, which I think is certainly true, does God approve? Well, you have to judge in terms of the way it is presented. And here God rewards the midwives for not carrying out Pharaoh's order. Part of the way in which they continued in their service was through the misrepresentation of what was going on in those Hebrew homes.

The other example is less ambiguous in terms of whether there is a falsehood. This is the familiar story of Rahab in Joshua chapter 2.

Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. "Go, look over the land," he said, "especially Jericho." So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there. The king of Jericho was told, "Look! Some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land." So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: "Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land." But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, "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 do not know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up to them." (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

Well, there is no ambiguity here. "They went that way. Go get them. I did not know who they were." She concealed them with the flax. I think she puts on another layer of flax in her verbiage here. Remember, the warrant for concealment was murderous intent. She was, strictly speaking, a traitor to Jericho in that she is identifying with God's people, and she is praised for that. The question always comes up, "Is what she said about the spies no longer being there a part of what we should affirm in the Rahab story?" That is hard to prove definitively, but it seems to me that it is the narrative as a whole that is being given approval. The king of Jericho has no right to the knowledge of that truth. It seems to me that it is one of those emergency circumstances where faithfulness in speech does not require the literal truth, but rather faithfulness in speech is used to deceive. After all, I think that we should remember that the essence of lying is in deception, not in the words used. The essence of lying is in deception. So people can deceive and still claim literal truth. They have in their minds some qualification that is different from other people. If a ministerial candidate is suspected of adultery and is asked the question, "Have you ever committed adultery?" He says, "Never." But in his mind, he adds, "On Sunday." That is a lie even though the qualification in his mind brings his words and his mind into conformity. However, that is not the real locus in terms of faithfulness in speech. You can lie with the truth. You can give a misimpression with the truth. So, there is something more to lying than just the form of words that you use. It is the intention to deceive.

John Murray is the strongest of modern-day advocates of the Augustinian position that we may never utter a falsehood. But even Murray acknowledges that we may use equivocation. In a just cause, we are not always obligated to tell the plain truth. I agree with that, but I think that that puts a premium on

cleverness. If you are clever enough, you can always think of some way to be ambiguous. I did it once intentionally. I will let you be the judge of this, but it happened when I was young on the faculty here. We were looking for a church history professor, and it was announced that Will Barker, who taught history and specialized in church history at the college, was going to be on the faculty of Covenant Seminary. Will Barker was also the dean at the college, and so the question went around, “Is he also going to be the dean at the seminary?” I had been told that he was. Will was a personal friend so I knew that he was, but that had not been announced. There were various reasons why that needed to be kept in confidence. I had a friend who had us over to dinner, and I knew what was going to happen because of his interest in history. I knew he was going to ask me whether or not Barker was going to be the dean. And, sure enough, it played out like I had written the script in advance. After the pleasantries he said, “Is it not great that Barker is going to come teach church history at the seminary?” I said, “Yes, it is great. You know, for the last couple of years I have been hoping for that and encouraging him to do it.” My friend asked, “Is he also going to be the dean?” I replied, “Well, that I cannot say,” and I changed the subject. That is the only time I thought of an ambiguous expression—“I cannot say.” I cannot say because I do not know or I cannot say because it is in confidence. Well, it was the latter. What I said was not so opaque that you could not figure it out. I actually asked my friend some years later, “Do you remember the time...” He said, “Yes, I remember. I remember feeling like I had stepped over some kind of a line.” But the confidence was preserved. I think that there are certain circumstances where you are going to need to ask a counter question. When you get these prying people, these gossips who want to push you, sometimes a frontal attack is best. For example, you might say, “That is gossip. We ought not talk about that.” Sometimes, a counter question is appropriate.

I think that there are some instances, such as in the village, where that is not a viable option. There is simply too much by way of deception that goes on for you to have clever little answers all the time. And therefore, come back to it. What does God really expect of us in terms of faithfulness in speech? Is there any divine precedent? Well, there is the psalm that says, “With the pure, you show yourself pure; with the crooked, you show yourself perverse.” That is a very striking assertion.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 there is an even more startling statement. This is not exactly a parallel to our situation, but it is sufficient to give us pause. It says, “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing.”—And Satan is culpable for that—“They perish because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved.”—So, they are responsible too.—“They perish because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved.” Verse 11 says, “For this reason”—because they refuse to love the truth, they have made a definitive stand against the truth—“God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.” That is God’s judicial hardening. There is plenty of background, plenty of opportunity, for them to have believed the truth. But having hardened their heart, there is now this judicial delusion. So, God Himself is not always open with everyone. That does not exactly fit our situation, but I think that it raises the issue or supports the idea that faithfulness in speech has to take relationships into account. Sometimes those relationships are so badly distorted and broken that open communication is impossible and falsehood is justifiable. I say that with a great deal of diffidence and caution and would add this one qualification: I think when we are asked whether we trust in Jesus as our Savior, even at the risk of our lives, our only answer can be yes, to affirm our faith in Christ. You see, there is more going on there than murderous design against us. If we deny our Lord, it exposes our whole commitment as a fraud—that our life is worth more to us than our profession of faith. So, in the Ukraine, when they were asked that question, they answered yes. Matthew 5:37 says, “Simply let your yes be yes and your no be no.” That came through very clearly, and I think that is right. When your faith itself is on the line, we have to confess our Lord.

To insist on verbal truthfulness in such circumstances is manifestly against the purposes for which God has given us speech. The radical disruption of human relationships alters the nature of the case. I was reading the story of Rahab to one of my sons—he was just going through the Bible at preschool—and got to the end of the story and he said, “Dad, Rahab told a lie. But it was a good lie, was it not, Dad? We had to talk about that because it is very important as children are growing up to know there are no exceptions and there are no good lies. There are falsehoods that may be justified in extreme cases as a last resort in the protection of human life, but they arise from an abnormal circumstance. That is why you get this element in tragic morality, hierarchicalism, and *prima facie* duties wanting to hold onto something. And I would say it is not that we can call lies, without qualification, good. I think they are right, but I would say they are regrettably necessary. The Chambon villagers were as open as they could be in those times. They were also kind to the authorities. Apart from this issue of revealing the whereabouts of Jews, they treated their countrymen with respect. It is not that this justifies any kind of thing against them.

One other thought that I have that I think is relevant is that we need to consider proportionality. If you accept that the necessary defense of innocent human life is one of those circumstances where human life may be taken—that itself is a problematic statement but that has generally been the Reformed tradition—then why should we not spare those murderers’ lives by telling them falsehoods? I think that the personal relationship has been so broken down. The reason for that is because of their evil intent and the breakdown of relationship does not seem reasonable proportionally to me that God would insist on literal truth in these circumstances. There are at least these two instances in the narrative portion of Scripture that I think set a precedent if we look carefully at the circumstances and do not use this to weaken our commitment to truth at all times, except for these emergency situations.