

an ethical dilemma

A Christian family man, Tom, who is married and has three children, works for a mid-size Manufacturing Company. His Vice President has asked him to help set up a home office (computers, etc.) and a web-page for a group that is promoting New Age spirituality. The Vice President is a partner in the formation of this new group. It is not uncommon for Tom to help the VP with projects outside his normal work, including personal endeavours. Indeed, were Tom to insist on refusing to do any outside projects, he would probably be dismissed. The boss is a generous employer who does not overtly take advantage of his employees. In fact, when they help him with outside projects, the favour is later usually handsomely returned.

The dilemma is this: should Tom jeopardise his job by declining to help with the project, or is it acceptable for him obey the requests of his VP?

a pious response

Tom has been offered advice from several people who advocate various degrees of stern resolve: —

- One says: Tom should spend two or three days in prayer and fasting before approaching his boss openly and honestly, and declining the project. He should at the same time present sufficient scriptural reasons for his refusal. If that means the loss of his job, then he must be willing to pay the price for faithfulness to the Lord.
- Another says: be open with the vice president about why he doesn't want to do this job. Tom should explain that as a Christian he cannot be happy about supporting this New Age group's efforts.

Even less should he be willing to help them set up a site to promote their false philosophy and anti-gospel religion.

- Another says: Tom is probably too pessimistic. He probably won't be sacked. Too many times we feel we know somebody's reaction before we ask. If Tom is honest and open to his VP he probably will not get the worst case scenario he seems to be expecting. But if he does, then he must see it as a trial of faith and obey his conscience.
- Another says: if Tom's conscience is troubled and he has no peace about accepting this task, then it would be best not to get involved, even at the risk of his job. God is able to provide a new and better job. Indeed, it may have been part of God's own plan to allow this test to come into Tom's life.

I am in general agreement with those responses, in the sense that they all represent a valid and biblical position, and if Tom is able to receive and heed such counsel, whatever the cost may be, then that is fine. There can be no doubt that we must do as conscience demands, especially if its demands agree with those of scripture. It is equally true that we must act in accord with faith, for *"anything that is not done in faith is sin"* (Ro 14:23, GW). To act against both conscience and faith must be foolish indeed.

However, before a final decision is made, with perhaps devastating consequences for a young family, Tom should bring some other factors into consideration

[a pragmatic response](#)

You will find a list of scriptures below that display various ethical and moral situations where a degree of flexibility is permitted. They show that not every problem can be solved by giving every person the same rule, regardless of his or her capacity to obey cheerfully and in faith. I do not think that we serve either God or our people well if we remove from them

the freedom to make diverse choices in areas where scripture allows such freedom.

Of course, people may differ as to which ethical/moral choices do include variable choices, but I don't think that the general idea of flexibility can be denied, otherwise we will simply descend into an ironclad casuistry akin to that of the Pharisees. Never forget how fiercely they were castigated by Jesus! (e.g. Mt 23: 13-28).

I hasten to say that I don't include the counsellors mentioned above in that crowd! I am indeed happy with the advice they gave to Tom, and if he should choose to follow it, then no doubt the Lord will be pleased. However, I would add this: *if, knowing himself, his depth of spirituality, his level of strength, the situation of his wife and children, and the like, he should finally, in faith and good conscience, choose otherwise*, then that too would have been acceptable to the Lord.

flexibility and inflexibility

Some moral, ethical, and spiritual choices are, of course, plainly decreed in scripture and we dare not deviate from them. But in many places one can discern an element of doubt, a potential for some measure of flexibility (for example, in the much-debated matter of divorce and re-marriage).

In such cases, where scripture is susceptible to different readings, my disposition is always to prefer a flexible rather than an inflexible view. I tremble lest I should fall under the indictment Christ laid upon the rule-making Pharisees, that they had made their followers "*twice as fit for hell*" as they were themselves (Mt 23:15). God forbid that any of us should attract the same denunciation!

concourse with the ungodly

Paul plainly declares that we cannot avoid concourse with the ungodly without leaving the world altogether! (1 Co 5:9-10) Indeed, whether we like it or not, we help ungodly people of every sort by the things we purchase day by day, the taxes we pay, the support we give to the communities in which we live, and the like.

Hence, suppose Tom were an electrician called in to fix a broken circuit in a Muslim's office? Should he scorn the task? Or suppose he is a grocer receiving an order from an atheist? Or a plumber sealing a leak for a Buddhist? A painter contracted by an active agnostic? A taxi driver picking up a stranger who could be anything? An office goods supplier receiving an order from the owner of a casino? Must he say "no" to them all?

Must Christians decline to offer such people any service?

Plainly, Paul would say "nonsense" to such isolationism.

pietist versus pragmatist

The church has always been split between those pious souls who insist upon the rules being scrupulously kept and those who are more pragmatic and flexible. It's rather like the bitter conflicts long ago (after some time of persecution had ended) that pitted bishops who were willing to accept recidivists back into the church against those who were adamant in rejecting them. The bishops often furiously excommunicated each other over the matter!

Similar quarrels are still happening between those who insist upon the highest standards for everyone, and those who reject the idea that everyone must follow the same rule. I have always been on the side of the latter!

an array of scriptures

- 2 Kg 5:18-19. This seems to be a situation similar to Tom's, where compromise was deemed, if not essential, at least practical. Rather than offend the king and lose his high office if not his life, Naaman was permitted to escort his royal master into the temple of Rimmon and even to bow down in apparent worship
- 1 Co 7:36-38. Whatever is the actual meaning of this passage (and there are many opinions on the matter), this much is clear: Paul acknowledges that what is possible for one man is not reasonable for another. One man can control his passions, and so remain unmarried. The other cannot, so Paul tells him to marry. He does not demand the same level of strength, or of moral or spiritual capacity from every person. He recognises that we are all different, and have differing strengths. The same idea is taught by Jesus in Mt 19:11, *"Not everyone can receive this word, but only those to whom it properly belongs."*
- In the application of rules to individual cases we need always to be wary of falling into the cruel error of an inflexible casuistry, which instead of enabling people to live in the joyous liberty of Christ, binds them into an enforced legalism. Sometimes that legalism can be the result of even sincere and godly advice, especially when that advice is given in a framework of unyielding insistence upon obedience to a rule (cp. Lu 6:1-11; etc). There were several occasions when Jesus denounced the Jewish religious leaders for laying unyielding and stifling rules upon the people, especially when those rules were not appropriate for every person at all times.

greater and lesser evils

- We need to avoid making a demand of someone that he or she cannot reasonably fulfil without causing more harm than good. In the

end, only the recipient of some piece of advice can truly say whether or not an action is appropriate.

Our task is not to make the decision for them, but to provide them with all the information they need to make the correct choice (that is, the one that is correct for them). Often that choice may be between two or more evils, and the task is to pick the one that will do the least harm.

Sometimes even a lie can be preferable to the truth (Joshua 2:4-6; Jg 4:20; 1 Sa 19:12-17; 21:1-15; 2 Sa 15:33-37; 17:15-22). Those are admittedly Old Testament stories, and may represent a lower morality than is taught in the NT. Yet I would find in them sufficient encouragement to lie rather than betray a girl to a rapist or a persecuted saint to the authorities. In other words, there are worse crimes than telling a lie, especially if the truth would bring vast hurt to an innocent person.

Many similar scenarios, involving other moral principles, could be easily constructed. I mean, sometimes a principle or rule has to yield to a more imperative necessity.

act in harmony with conscience and faith

- The idea that not everyone at all times can follow the same rules seems to be echoed by Paul in several places, e.g. 1 Co 8:1-13; 10:23-29; Ro 14:13-23, especially verses 22-23; 15:1. Those references, and some others like them, all recognise how much Christian people can differ from each other in understanding, conscience, ability, strength, faith, and the like. Paul was fully aware of those differences, and therefore allowed considerable freedom of choice as to how each person worked out in daily life the purposes of God.

- Consider also the strange petition in the *Lord's Prayer*, "*Lead us not into temptation.*" Commentators squirm wretchedly as they try to wriggle away from the idea that God would lead anyone at any time into temptation! I won't try to offer my own poor explanation, but I can say this much: the petition at least implies a sense of impending failure, a request not to be tried too far, to be allowed an easier path. It suggests that Jesus was fully aware that what was possible for one was impossible for another. He did not demand the same level of strength, the same spiritual courage and capacity from everyone, but recognised that all of us are strong in some things and weak in others. He was compassionate towards human frailty and intolerant of stern and inflexible rule-makers.

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