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## MEDICAL MARIJUANA: MIRACLE DRUG OR SPIRITUAL POISON?

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### SYNOPSIS

There has been a great push to legalize the use of medical marijuana. Although it has been effective in treating some illnesses, the progression of medical marijuana has also greatly increased the access and social acceptance of this drug. I do not believe that the medical benefits of smoking marijuana outweigh the risk for at least four reasons. The first reason is the impact that acceptance of medical marijuana has on our culture. Medical marijuana has negative social affects because it greatly increases the number of individuals using the drug. Second, the biblical prohibition against intoxication applies to almost everyone who smokes marijuana. Third, although the physical health dangers have been overstated in the past, there are physical and psychological dangers involved with smoking marijuana. Lastly, and most importantly, there are spiritual dangers in smoking marijuana. Marijuana is used to enhance our earthly experience to feel enlightened, tapping our inner energy, and to feel one with the universe. These are consistent with the objectives of Eastern religious thought, and are antithetical to the message of Jesus Christ. We find greater meaning and peace not through the introduction of a psychoactive chemical to our brains, but through the person and work of our Savior.

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A heartbreaking video shows young Charlotte Figi struggling in the midst of a grand mal seizure.<sup>1</sup> She suffers from a rare disease called Dravet syndrome, which causes uncontrollable, intractable seizures starting at a very young age. Charlotte experienced as many as three hundred of these seizures a week. Traditional antiseizure medication did not work, and her doctors expected her condition to end her life at an early age. Her parents sought after anything that would help their daughter to live. After searching the Internet, they found some evidence that a chemical found in marijuana had shown some promise in treating certain seizure disorders. They elected to give their daughter an oil-based oral dose of a special strain of marijuana, later named Charlotte's Web in her honor. This has been very effective in treating her seizures. She is now six years old and appears to be thriving. Currently, forty-three other patients are being treated with this strain of marijuana for their seizures. In Charlotte's case, the chemical isolated from marijuana literally saved her life.

This and other stories like it have helped to change the way our culture views marijuana. In fact, there has been a radical shift in the acceptance of marijuana in the last fifteen years not only as a medication but also for recreational use. In 1991, polling data from the Pew Foundation revealed that only 17 percent of individuals believed that marijuana should be legal, while in the most recent poll, a majority of 52 percent supported legalization. Almost three-quarters of Americans are in favor of allowing the sale and use of medical marijuana when recommended by a doctor.<sup>2</sup> Twenty states have legalized marijuana for medical use, and in January 2014, Colorado and the state of Washington legalized marijuana for recreational use. Trends such as these show how the culture has shifted its views about marijuana.

The moral convictions of Americans regarding marijuana have also shown a significant evolution. In 2006, 50 percent of individuals polled believed that smoking marijuana was morally wrong. In 2013, that number decreased to 32 percent. Among young persons, only 26 percent of those in the millennial generation believe that smoking pot is morally problematic.<sup>3</sup> The shift in public opinion in favor of allowing the sale and possession of marijuana has been great, especially among the younger generation. Marijuana traditionally was associated with rebellion and the counterculture, but this is no longer the case. Pot has gone mainstream. If the current political momentum continues, there is little doubt that marijuana will be legal in much of the United States in the near future. From a Christian perspective, this fundamental change in attitude by our culture presents significant challenges. Does the Bible offer any guidance about smoking marijuana? Is there a difference between taking marijuana for medicinal purposes and taking it for recreation? When marijuana was illegal throughout the United States, we could point to Romans 13:1–7 to argue that we had a responsibility not to use or condone the use of marijuana because the law forbade it. With the momentum moving toward legalization, this argument is becoming

increasingly inapplicable. A recent editorial in a major Christian publication argued that smoking marijuana falls under the purview of Christian freedom.<sup>4</sup> Marijuana supporters have also attempted to use Scripture to support their position. They claim Genesis 1:27 argues that consumption of a seed-bearing plant (e.g. cannabis), designed by God, is not morally problematic. A thoughtful, biblical analysis of these issues is necessary, and should help to guide a Christian's perspective on marijuana.

Striving to demonstrate that therapeutic usage and recreational usage of marijuana are closely related, it is important to define these terms as we use them. Consuming marijuana therapeutically has the goal of treating the cause or symptoms of a pathological condition. The goal of the user is to return the symptoms or the state of the human body to a pre-pathological state, or a return to normalcy. Consuming marijuana for recreation has the goal of enhancing one's human experience beyond everyday sensations. In other words, normalcy is the state that one wishes to escape by taking the drug!

I will examine four factors in considering whether or not smoking marijuana for medicinal purposes is biblically sound. The first factor is the potential effect that acceptance of medical marijuana may have on the culture around us. The second factor is the biblical prohibition against drunkenness or intoxication. The third factor is the physical effects that marijuana has on the body. The last factor is the possible spiritual influence that taking a known psychoactive substance may have on the health of the soul.

## **THE EFFECT ON OUR CULTURE**

Although touted by advocates as the latest wonder drug that has the promise to treat all sorts of maladies, the truth behind the push for medical marijuana is less benevolent. In the state of Colorado, a surprisingly large number of citizens have been granted a medical marijuana card—more than 2 percent of the entire population.<sup>5</sup> Although patients such as Charlotte are frequently cited to reveal the incredible power of this drug, the truth is that a very small minority of marijuana recommendations are given to patients suffering from conditions such as hers. In fact, only one in twenty are being treated for the seizures that plagued Charlotte. Rather, 94 percent of medical marijuana patients take the drug for “severe pain,” a subjective symptom that is difficult to confirm objectively.<sup>6</sup> This is problematic because there are more proven, effective, reliable medications for pain control available. In a talk supporting medical marijuana, grower Josh Stanley openly spoke about the “horrible, horrible epidemic of back pain that just swept across college campuses” once medical marijuana became available.<sup>7</sup> Even physicians, who usually applaud the increased availability of any drug, have been

skeptical of the use and perceived need for medical marijuana. A study done among the family physicians of Colorado revealed that a majority did not recommend marijuana for their patients who have chronic pain.<sup>8</sup> Although the medical benefits for users are questionable, the increased availability of marijuana when legalized for medicinal use is not. According to one report, in 2011 there were more medical marijuana dispensaries in Denver than Starbucks stores.<sup>9</sup>

It is legitimate and laudable to use medications to treat the symptoms of disease. But exploiting this compassion in order to increase access to a recreational drug is wrong.

### **Baby Steps of Support**

But those advocating the legalization of marijuana for recreation have ardently supported medical marijuana initiatives, believing that it is an important first step for complete legalization. In Colorado and Washington, the acceptance of medical marijuana was an essential step to complete legalization. Clearly, so-called “medical” marijuana has been and will continue to be used for reasons other than legitimate medical purposes.

Although we live in a very individualistic culture, we need to recognize that our actions affect our collective community. Even if we have a legal right and freedom to take this drug, there are circumstances in which the negative effect on our culture may serve to modify our behavior. The acceptance of medical marijuana has unquestionably increased general access to the drug and thus the number of marijuana users. Our participation in a medical marijuana program, even if done for noble purposes, contributes to the cultural changes mentioned. Does helping to increase the number of individuals on psychotropic drugs further the cause of Christ or help to usher in His kingdom? We should concern ourselves that a decision to smoke marijuana, even if for medicinal purposes, affects the individuals and the culture around us.

### **THE PROHIBITION AGAINST INTOXICATION**

Although the Bible does not specifically mention marijuana, we can use biblical principles that apply to alcohol to help guide us in its use. Scripture is clear that drunkenness is sinful.<sup>10</sup> In 1 Peter 5:8, we find that a “sober-minded” man is best able to resist the Devil, who prowls around like a roaring lion and seeks to devour us.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that if the aim of recreational use of marijuana is to become intoxicated, then its use would fall under this biblical prohibition. Using marijuana recreationally is purposefully to use a chemical to change or enhance the way our minds process

thoughts and ideas. One may argue that although drinking alcohol has the potential for intoxication, we may drink alcohol moderately for its value as a beverage and not become intoxicated. Is this also true with marijuana? Furthermore, the mere possibility of intoxication does not preclude our use of many medications. For example, I inject short-acting highly addictive narcotics for anesthetic purposes routinely in my oral and maxillofacial surgery practice. Should this be considered sinful for the same reason?

Studies have shown that an intoxicating dose of THC, the psychoactive chemical in marijuana, is approximately 7mg.<sup>12</sup> If smoked, this dose is reached after about 4 inhalations. Although it may be theoretically possible to consume a nonintoxicating dose, it would appear that this rarely happens. Typical marijuana users self-dose the amount of THC they consume by smoking until they feel a particular way. In regards to the benefits of THC, all of its proposed therapeutic benefits occur at intoxicating doses, so that it would not be possible to experience the beneficial effects of THC without also experiencing intoxication. The two effects cannot presently be separated.

### **Brushing aside the Risks**

Although we use mind-altering medications with abuse potential in medicine, they differ significantly from marijuana in regards to both dosage and means of delivery. When a medication with abuse potential is given, the goal is to maximize the therapeutic effect while minimizing the risk of side effects. The dose is carefully determined to ensure that the positive effect is gained while minimizing any negative consequences. This is not possible in the case of most patients who take marijuana. Although it can be taken orally, the vast majority of users prefer to smoke or vaporize marijuana, in order to maximize the rate that the drug is delivered to the brain.<sup>13</sup> There is no way for a physician accurately to control the dose of smoked marijuana, and patients simply dose themselves until they subjectively feel a certain way. We simply do not treat other medications this way. For example, we would not allow a patient to administer a limitless amount of a strong narcotic until they subjectively felt better.

### **THE EFFECT ON THE BODY**

In the past, many have overexaggerated the physical dangers of smoking marijuana. In fact, from a lethality standpoint, THC is actually quite a safe drug. Animal studies have shown that a lethal dose of THC is over five thousand times the intoxicating dose.<sup>14</sup> Does this mean that marijuana is completely safe? The truth is that marijuana is neither physically innocuous nor an incredibly dangerous drug to our body.

Advocates for increased access to marijuana claim that it is impossible to overdose, it is nonaddictive, and it is safer than many medications that we legally take. However, despite the claims that it is relatively harmless, there are significant health concerns, especially with smoked marijuana. A recent study at Northwestern University revealed that even a very moderate amount of smoking leads to detectable changes in the structure of the brain. There was also a relationship between the amount of marijuana smoked and the degree of morphologic change. Chief researcher Dr. Hans Breiter states, "People think a little recreational use shouldn't cause a problem, if someone is doing OK with work or school. Our data directly says that this is not the case."<sup>15</sup>

### **Marijuana and Memory**

Studies have also confirmed that marijuana has significant effects on short-term memory. Those consuming even a small amount of marijuana may have a difficult time following a basic conversation. Marijuana also has significant physiological effects on the cardiovascular system, increasing heart rate and decreasing blood pressure quickly after dosing. There are also substantial psychological effects for many users, especially at higher doses or for those with little experience. Panic attacks or disturbing hallucinations have been reported, and these effects can happen unpredictably. A correlation between marijuana use and mental illness has been noted, but it remains a controversial view that pot is a causative agent for mental disease.

Marijuana is not an innocuous drug. However, one may reasonably argue that the possible negative effects on the body are worth the danger if there is a potential benefit to smoking pot. Even if the physical dangers of marijuana are an acceptable risk, the potential danger to our spiritual health also needs to be considered.

### **MARIJUANA AND SPIRITUAL HEALTH**

Since the effects of marijuana or any psychoactive substance results in an intense subjective experience, it can be difficult to describe using words. The experience itself is also highly dependent on the dose of the medication taken, the environment where it is taken, and the emotional state of the individual using the drug. Users frequently define the feeling of being "high" at the earliest doses as a pleasant, relaxing, anxiety-relieving intoxication. The next level of intoxication can leave a user feeling "stoned," which is a state associated with hallucinations and on occasion results in immobility or sleep. Higher doses increase the risk of unpleasant experiences, including panic attacks and occasional psychotic episodes. Most users self-titrate the amount of THC absorbed in

order to reach their desired psychological state of mind while limiting unpleasant side effects.

Describing the very subjective spiritual dimension of smoking marijuana is also quite challenging, but there are some characteristics to the experience that many users share. The objective of many users is described as feeling “enlightened” or “gaining a higher level of consciousness” through the psychoactive nature of the drug. For example, marijuana proponent Jane Bello describes a number of “spiritual benefits” of smoking marijuana. She states that “deep within us, an essential need for a higher meaning of life waits to be unlocked.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, the base desires and gnawing unhappiness that is part of the human experience is replaced by a deeper meaning and profound understanding.<sup>17</sup> There is locked within us an energy or truth that is waiting to be opened by altering our brain chemistry.

### **Enlightenment**

Even more striking is the report of a frequent marijuana user who described a particular experience as the “single most profound, spiritually moving, and enlightening” moment of his life. This is his description of his enlightened “trip”: “My mind ceased to be a distinct entity, but became one with the entire universe. At the same time, however, nothing existed at all. It was infinity and zero at the same time. All was one and one was all. But it was also nothing.”<sup>18</sup>

This “enlightenment” that is described is similar to that noted in Eastern religious thought. In fact, marijuana has been used for millennia in many religions, especially in India, China, and Tibet,<sup>19</sup> in order to enhance meditation and to reach a state of euphoric oneness with our world. The supreme Hindu god Shiva is often depicted drinking a cup filled with “bhang,” which is made from the cannabis plant. Legend states that Shiva discovered the plant after wandering into a field after experiencing family conflict. After falling asleep, his curiosity led him to consume the cannabis plant, thus decreasing his anxiety and giving him a sense of peace. It became his favorite food, and he is described as the “Lord of Bhang.”<sup>20</sup> Bhang is often consumed by participants during the holy festivals of Holi and Maha Shivaratri, the latter being in honor of Shiva.<sup>21</sup> Partaking of bhang is also done in order to cleanse Hindus from their sins. One report states, “Taken in the early morning such bhang cleanses the user from sin, frees him from the punishment of scores of sins, and entitles him to reap the fruits of a thousand horse-sacrifices.”<sup>22</sup>

In short, the psychoactive nature of the THC in marijuana is used both historically and today to gain higher consciousness, to unlock spiritual energy within, to discover the deeper meaning of life, and even to “cleanse” one of his or her sins.

Marijuana is used as a means to become one with the universe, which is an objective of certain Eastern religions. This is antithetical to our purpose as followers of Jesus Christ, in which we seek to worship the creator of our universe, not seek to become one with His creation.

### **Escapism**

The answers to our sinful human condition, gnawing dissatisfaction, and deeper meaning of life should not be sought and cannot be found by using a brain-altering drug to look inward. The answers can be found only in the person of Jesus Christ, and the work He has performed on our behalf. Even if one does not take marijuana with a goal of obtaining a higher spiritual state, the danger of introducing such a substance into your brain should not be taken lightly. Even if a substance may benefit the body, we should be careful of its potential effect on the spiritual health of our souls.

I believe the use of marijuana or other psychoactive drugs for recreational purposes is clearly wrong. The biblical prohibition against intoxication is clear, and using a drug to enhance our human experience is attempting to replace the role that Jesus Christ should possess in our lives. The medicinal use of marijuana is more complex, but we need to analyze whether the therapeutic effect on our physical body is worth the potential effects on our community and our spiritual health. If we are able to isolate a medically effective chemical from the marijuana plant, control its dose carefully, and limit its potential psychoactive side effects, it would be reasonable to support that laudable goal. So far, using the Charlotte's Web strain of marijuana has been effective in only a few selective conditions, and has shown only limited potential to help with others. Regardless, we should be very cautious in supporting a medication with so much potential to damage not only our bodies but also our souls.

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#### **NOTES**

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