

Dear Friends,

Exodus 20: 7

You shall not make wrongful use of God's name.

When our children were young, we did our best to keep some kind of control over what they saw on television. I remember Rachel wanting to watch The Simpsons, no doubt all her friends at school were talking about it. We agreed to her viewing it, as long it didn't contain any swearing. Rachel accepted this condition. I sat with her to monitor the language. A moment came when Homer Simpson made a promise. He made his vow by holding up his hand and saying "I swear". Rachel looked at me. Her face had fallen and she made a sound to show her disappointment. At which point I realised that we were making a fuss about swearing, when she was not even really very sure what it was. I explained and we kept watching.

Homer Simpson shows us that swearing can be understood as either using bad language or making a vow. The third commandment is often seen as being about bad language when it probably has more to do with vows. If someone wanted to show that they were honest, they could do it with an oath. Perhaps they were trying to prove that they would be loyal to someone. They could do this by swearing in God's name that they would not betray the other person. They could also have included some suggestions of how God might punish them if they failed to keep their promise. Perhaps God could take their health or their life. If they did not mean what they were saying, if they were really intending to stab the person in the back, then they were making wrongful use of God's name. They were swearing in God's name when they had no intention of keeping their promise. They were calling on God to punish them if they were not honest, when they did not actually believe that God would do anything of the sort. They were dishonestly using God for their own purposes, so that they could persuade the person to give them trust which they did not deserve. This showed a lack of respect for God.

By using God to meet their own ends, they were involving God in things in which God would not want to be involved. They were claiming to be doing something in God's name when actually God would oppose what they were doing. There are many examples of that. For example, when people use God to justify prejudice or acts of slaughter, such as when God has been used as an argument for slavery, apartheid, or causing the deaths of thousands by flying aeroplanes into buildings. These are the real horrors which maybe give us some clues as to what it really is to make wrongful use of God's name.

God bless you,

Tony