

CAN CHRISTIANS USE MARIJUANA IN GOOD CONSCIENCE?

BY

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## **Abstract**

At the time of writing this thesis, twenty-three states (and the District of Columbia) had already legalized marijuana for medical use. Alaska, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, and the District of Columbia also legalized recreational marijuana use. The marijuana movement has come quite a way in just the past decade, let alone the time when many of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) pastors entered the ministry. Many Americans are convinced that public support will continue to grow until marijuana is legal – both medicinally and recreationally – everywhere in the United States of America. Inevitably, the question will surface more and more, “Pastor, can Christians use marijuana in good conscience?” This thesis will answer that question, regarding both medicinal and recreational use. It will frame the discussion for WELS pastors using the most recent science, most current laws, and timeless scriptural principles. After examining the science of marijuana, the political situation, and most importantly, scriptural principles, it can be concluded: 1) Yes, a Christian can use medicinal marijuana in good conscience within limited circumstances that are both beneficial and God-pleasing, and 2) While recreational use is technically an adiaphoron and pastors thus must be careful about saying too much, Christians would have to hurdle many political, societal, and scriptural questions before using it with a clear conscience.

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## Introduction

On a late spring day in 2014 during my vicar year in Thornton, Colorado,<sup>1</sup> three called worker friends and I enjoyed some pizza and a glass of beer in Boulder. Sitting on that same outdoor patio just a few feet from us, four students from the University of Colorado were doing the exact same thing. Then one of them pulled out a marijuana pipe, took a hit<sup>2</sup> of marijuana, and handed it off to his friends. I remember the thought passing through my mind, “Could we be doing that? Could called workers – or Christians in general – socialize around a pizza, beer, and some marijuana, just like these college students are doing?” That was just one example of the recreational side which I encountered. I also came across the medicinal side. Earlier that vicar year a pastor in Colorado recalled the time leading up to a recent surgery when he asked himself, “What will I do if the doctor recommends or prescribes medicinal marijuana for the pain?”

These questions may seem laughable and perhaps even offensive to pastors who have been serving God faithfully in public ministry for decades. The very same questions would have seemed inappropriate to me as recently as a few years ago. The times have changed, however, and the court of public opinion appears to have clouded a once black and white issue. According to a 2013 Pew Research survey of Americans, “32% say that smoking marijuana is morally wrong, an 18-point decline since 2006 (50%). Over this period, the percentage saying that smoking marijuana is not a moral issue has risen 15 points (from 35% then to 50% today).”<sup>3</sup> Public opinion clearly has changed at a rapid rate. Policy at some state levels has changed as well. Twenty-three states have made it legal to use medicinal marijuana. Among these states are Minnesota, Michigan, and Illinois – portions of the Midwest in which a significant percentage of Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) congregations are located. In addition to medicinal use, Alaska, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, and the District of Columbia have made it legal to use marijuana recreationally. WELS has congregations in these areas as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Personal disclaimer: I had interest in this topic months before I was assigned to Colorado for vicar year. A year in Colorado helped a great deal to reinforce my interest, and this paper draws on a year’s worth of experience in that particular state. I did *not* attempt to compare and contrast Colorado with Washington or any other states. Perhaps another thesis could identify and appraise those similarities and differences.

<sup>2</sup> A *hit* is an inhalation of marijuana smoke. Appendix A has a list of terms and definitions associated with marijuana use.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, “Majority Now Supports Legalizing Marijuana,” 3, <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/4-4-13%20Marijuana%20Release.pdf> (accessed October 12, 2014).

The public opinion and legislative action have changed the landscape in our nation, but what about WELS? It would be naïve not to think that some WELS members (if only young members) are wrestling with the issue of marijuana use. WELS Christians may not be of the world, but they are still in the world and susceptible to its opinions. Even if every member of WELS opposes marijuana use, pastors need to keep in mind those people whom they want to evangelize. If (as the previously cited poll declares) nearly 50% of prospects will consider marijuana use morally acceptable, what effect will that have on how pastors do ministry? The question, “Can Christians use marijuana in good conscience?” will have an impact on pastors and their congregations.

That question is admittedly broad, but it goes with the purposes of this particular thesis. Nearly every adult knows about marijuana – what it is, why people use it, etc. But how many Americans know what marijuana does and how it acts? Closer to home, how many WELS pastors know the basics about how marijuana works? This paper will give a basic knowledge of marijuana. Available scientific materials are improving greatly in both quantity and quality. The more a pastor reads on the subject, the more he will discover different roads of research he could follow. It would be easy to get lost in the individual trees of research and not see the forest of pastoral implications and scriptural answers. Therefore, this thesis is intended to be broad rather than comprehensive. It seeks to help frame discussion in the wake of rapidly changing public opinion and scientific findings.

Still, the paper hopefully will expand knowledge. The thesis will define marijuana technically and colloquially. It will briefly explore marijuana’s history both in the ancient world and in America. Perhaps most beneficially, the thesis will help explain how marijuana works. Again, these portions will be brief overviews, especially the section dealing with the science of marijuana. Most WELS pastors do not have backgrounds in science. The goal is not a comprehensive study of all the latest findings. Rather, it is that the pastor who reads this paper receives a basic understanding in order that he can better discuss issues and be equipped to do more research if desired, much in the same way he might do some reading regarding a new disease just diagnosed in a parishioner.

Once the reader has a working knowledge about the drug, the thesis will look at the two different spheres of use: medicinal and recreational. Concerning the former, what are the benefits and risks? Science speaks to both. Issues also exist with medicinal marijuana’s legality at both

state and federal levels. After those underlying issues have been examined, the paper will identify the biblical principles and arrive at an answer to the question, “Can the Christian in good conscience use marijuana *medicinally*?”

Recreational use will require more time. First, of all, what exactly do people mean by “recreational use?” What does it look like? That section will also necessitate more discipline to stay objective. Recreational use remains an especially polarizing topic. Proponents and opponents often find themselves on completely different ends of the spectrum, sometimes harboring strong biases. Pastors will do well to approach the issue of recreational use as unbiased as possible, whereby they are best able to evaluate what scientific facts, others’ personal experiences, politics, and Scripture all have to say.

That last sentence provides the briefest catalog of the many underlying questions and issues with recreational use. Secular arguments and questions need to be looked at, especially the popular theme of alcohol and tobacco vs. marijuana. People also raise issues of personal rights, state’s rights, racial profiling, and disproportionate use of public funds in prosecuting marijuana-related crimes. There is value in approaching these topics, and, therefore, this paper will touch on them. However, Lutheran pastors will want to ask questions only they can and ones which pertain to their ministries. The real meat of this thesis, then, examines those kinds of questions which deal with the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment (government), the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment (the God-given body), Christian offense, and finally sanctification – especially in light of Galatians chapter 5.

“Can the Christian use marijuana in good conscience?” Given the variety of circumstances and opinions today, can the question even be answered? While the issue seems to be grayer than it ever has been, I do believe that WELS pastors can give answers to themselves and their members. “Can the Christian use marijuana in good conscience?” After examining the science of marijuana, the political situation, and most importantly, scriptural principles, I have concluded: 1) Yes, a Christian can use medicinal marijuana in good conscience in a way that is both beneficial and God-pleasing, and 2) While recreational use is technically an adiaphoron and pastors thus must be careful about saying too much, Christians would have to hurdle many political, societal, and scriptural questions before using it with a clear conscience.

## **Literature Review**

The body of marijuana research is growing, but that is not saying too much. A problem

exists with marijuana research, especially in America. The substance that scientists want to study is illegal.<sup>4</sup> Researchers, therefore, have had to wrestle with the problems which federal and state laws pose. In addition, a study needs approval from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, an organization that is focused not on benefits but abuse and has been known for its tedious application process.<sup>5</sup> Research then tends to become biased. Scientists often look only at the negative effects of use, not the positives. Marijuana also carries a stigma, and American scientists have been reluctant to put their reputations in their professional communities on the line. For all these reasons, marijuana research has been quite limited, especially compared to alcohol or tobacco.

In recent years, however, studies are becoming more frequent, within and without the United States. Nationally known doctor Sanjay Gupta points to anti-cancer effects of marijuana being studied in Spain and Israel.<sup>6</sup> A major topic that has emerged from the recent studies is the understanding of the human body's endocannabinoid system. That topic will be discussed later, but for now, it suffices to say that the endocannabinoid system is part of every human's physiology. It functions as the body's natural way of receiving cannabinoids including tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the main psychoactive ingredient in marijuana that produces a high. Along with this research, scientists are discovering legitimate medical uses for marijuana. The situations include everything from chemotherapy treatments to Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Still, for all the increase in research, the results remain limited to recent history. Obstacles in the past have prevented quality long term research. Long term effects, therefore, can only be roughly sketched out at this point.

As a summary, anyone looking to read materials on marijuana research, needs to keep these points in mind: 1) older research can start from a negative viewpoint which might lead to a negative bias; 2) in reaction to that negative bias, the newest research at times can go too far in the other direction, strongly serving as a proponent and coming across as very accusatory of past research; and 3) long term effects are not well understood.

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<sup>4</sup> In 1968 the federal government did start marijuana research at the University of Mississippi. As part of the government's Investigation New Drug program, the federal government allows the university to grow marijuana which the government then sends to a small number of accepted participants.

<sup>5</sup> Sanjay Gupta, "Why I Changed My Mind on Weed," <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/08/health/gupta-changed-mind-marijuana/index.html> (accessed September 24, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

The introduction stated that this paper will not dive too deep regarding the science of marijuana. Research for this paper kept pointing to new studies and findings. The options started to become overwhelming. In keeping with this paper's broad purpose, therefore, many of those leads went unexamined. For the scientific side of research, this thesis relied heavily on one collection of essays, compiled in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*.<sup>7</sup> This book covers a wide range of issues and does so in a professional, scholarly manner. Essays contain many references to studies and other resources, providing many options for more in-depth study.

However, *The Pot Book* does not try to hide the fact that it is a proponent of marijuana use, medicinally and recreationally. Its back cover states, "This book candidly offers necessary facts and authoritative opinions to a society steeped in marijuana myths, misconceptions, and stereotypes." This goes back to the point about a potential overreaction to slanted research done in the past. Some essays speak strongly against government and religion (Christianity in particular, as will be seen shortly). A couple essayists sound like they are grinding personal axes and, in the most extreme of cases, seem to be advocating conspiracy theory. *The Pot Book* illustrates the different types of reading materials that are easily available. Some are very objective; others play on preconceived thoughts and emotions. Ultimately, *The Pot Book* is quite useful for understanding both the science of marijuana and getting a sense for the dynamics in the debates.

Outside of scholarly works and professional research, there is no shortage of materials to watch and read, especially on the Internet. Searching the words "marijuana documentary" on YouTube resulted in about 1,330,000 videos. Newspapers frequently cover the issues, and with Internet access to newspapers across the country, a reader can discover plenty of different perspectives, get insights into local topics, and read the latest polls on marijuana.

One newspaper deserves special attention. I remember going into vicar year and thinking, "If I get just ten articles from Colorado newspapers about marijuana for thesis research, I'll be happy." By Christmas I probably had twice that many. Then, in early 2014, *The Denver Post* started its own marijuana section called "The Cannabist," equipped with a fulltime editor. It is

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<sup>7</sup> Julie Holland, M.D., ed., *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010).



the first section of its kind to appear in a major American newspaper. The Cannabist’s website<sup>8</sup> provides a plethora of articles and links, dealing with Denver, the nation, and major stories in between. Articles range from stories about local and federal laws, to marijuana in culture, and even to strain reviews.<sup>9</sup> By the end of vicar year, I stopped bookmarking links because there were just too many. In fact, I even stopped checking The Cannabist’s website during this actual writing process in order to stay focused on the information already gleaned. For me, The Cannabist proved to be a big help in getting a pulse of society’s view on marijuana and how there is – in my opinion – a subtle but very intentional effort to “rebrand” marijuana. Articles that have appeared in The Cannabist try to distance marijuana from the stoner<sup>10</sup> connotations and reclassify it as high society. Articles detail how marijuana can be used in cooking that is “in its own way high art”<sup>11</sup> and can have a partnership with high society, including the symphony.<sup>12</sup>

This now brings the paper to the material written from a Christian perspective. Not much exists. Even less comes from a confessional Lutheran perspective. That serves as the main impetus for writing this paper. The older articles found online with a Christian perspective were brief, and they obviously did not address or even anticipate modern circumstances. Of the most recent articles, it was refreshing to see, generally, a high view of Scripture and honest wrestling with 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment questions<sup>13</sup> as well as the very important issue of offense. This thesis aims to add to the biblically-based Christian perspective on the subject, using sound Lutheran confessional principles.

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<sup>8</sup> [www.thecannabist.co](http://www.thecannabist.co)

<sup>9</sup> A “strain” is a variety of cannabis, whether pure or hybrid, developed to produce a particular effect. These strain reviews are comparable to any food or drink review, except that they sometimes also chronicle the high (cf. Appendix A).

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>11</sup> Matt Phillips, “Cooking with Cannabis: How Marijuana Affects Baked Goods in Colorado,” *The Denver Post*, September 11, 2013, [http://www.denverpost.com/broncos/ci\\_24069611/how-marijuana-affects-baked-goods](http://www.denverpost.com/broncos/ci_24069611/how-marijuana-affects-baked-goods) (accessed September 23, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> John Wenzel, “Colorado Symphony Orchestra Rolls Out First Cannabis-Linked Concert,” *The Denver Post*, May 27, 2014, [http://www.denverpost.com/entertainment/ci\\_25827194/colorado-symphony-orchestras-first-pot-concert-classical-gas](http://www.denverpost.com/entertainment/ci_25827194/colorado-symphony-orchestras-first-pot-concert-classical-gas) (accessed May 27, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> The authors, however, did not explicitly refer to those commandments, as WELS pastors would, based on study of Martin Luther’s Large Catechism and Small Catechism.

## Cannabis in the Bible?

The paper has already mentioned that for nearly a century cannabis<sup>14</sup> has had a stigma within American society. Proponents have tried to get rid of that stigma by pointing back to historical precedents of use. An argument that will interest the confessional Lutheran pastor is the claim that cannabis is not only referred to in the Bible, it was used by God's people in both the Old and New Testaments. In fact, the argument claims that two of the Bible's most important figures, Moses and Jesus Christ, were closely associated with cannabis use.

The key piece of evidence for the Old Testament discussion of cannabis centers on archaeology dating back to ancient Mesopotamia and the Assyrian Empire. Archaeologists have found ancient records coming from Egypt and Mesopotamia which detail the use of cannabis for religious and medical purposes. Scholars date these records as far back as 1700 B.C.<sup>15</sup> Of course, right between these two powerful regions lay God's chosen people, Israel. Surrounded by Egypt and Assyria, some scholars claim it was only natural for the Israelites to incorporate cannabis into their society too, especially into their religious culture.

After studying such archaeological finds, etymologist Sula Benet did a comparative study of the Ancient Near East (ANE) terms for cannabis and any possible correlations in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament as well as the Aramaic Targum. The Ancient Near East word for cannabis is transliterated as *qunabu* and sometimes *qunubu*. The Hebrew words Sula Benet focused on were קִנְוָה and בְּשֵׂם as they appear in Exodus 30:23, Song of Songs 4:14, Isaiah 43:24, and Jeremiah 6:20 (among some others). After her study, Sula Benet declared that “in the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament there are references to hemp,<sup>16</sup> both as incense, which was an integral part of religious celebration, and as an intoxicant.”<sup>17</sup> Chris Bennett explains the research and conclusion:

Benet's etymological research regarding the Hebrew terms *q'eneh bosem* [קִנְוָה-בְּשֵׂם] and *q'eneh* [קִנְוָה] was based on tracing the modern word *cannabis* back through history to show the similarities between the cognitive pronunciation of *cannabis* and *q'eneh bosem*,

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<sup>14</sup> Cannabis is, for all intents and purposes, practically a synonym of marijuana. A discussion of terms will follow, but the reader already may want to look at Appendix A for terms.

<sup>15</sup> Chris Bennett, “Early/Ancient History,” in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 20, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Hemp is used here as synonymous with cannabis (cf. Appendix A).

<sup>17</sup> Chris Bennett, “Early/Ancient History,” 21.

as well as comparing the term to the names used for cannabis by contemporary kingdoms, such as the Assyrian and Babylonian term for the plant, *qunubu*. In fact, the term *q'neh bosem* is the Hebrew transliteration of an earlier Indo-European term for the plant, *canna*... This use of an Indo-European word in the Semitic language shows that the ritual use of cannabis came to the Hebrews from foreign sources and as an item of trade; it retained the core aspects of its original name.<sup>18</sup>

To any lay reader, the argument sounds convincing. It does not take in-depth study, however, for a WELS pastor to quickly see holes in Benet's argument. The Hebrew noun קנה has a very broad meaning. Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB) offers "stalk, reed, calamus, aromatic reed" as possible definitions.<sup>19</sup> The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT) offers "that which is shaped like a reed, i.e. a stalk."<sup>20</sup> Often the Septuagint translated this word as *καλάμου*, which means "reed."<sup>21</sup> *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* explains *καλάμου* further, "Collectively, of plants, which are neither bush nor tree."<sup>22</sup> Nowhere does the word *cannabis* appear as an offered definition of the Hebrew word קנה. In addition, Old Testament writers often use קנה in the illustration of "a splintered reed" (as in Isaiah 36:6), i.e. a walking staff that is cracked. Cannabis plants do not fit that imagery at all. They never have the stiffness needed to become a sort of staff. Even after just a brief look at lexicons, the argument loses any punch it may have had. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Professor John Brug very quickly pointed out after he was asked to take a look at Sula Benet's etymological claims, "Cannabis and קנה just have some similar letters and sound somewhat similar. That's all. There is no connection."

Still, Chris Bennett states, "From the time of Moses and throughout the kingdom period, the use of cannabis in a ritual context had continued."<sup>23</sup> A look at the "key" Old Testament verses further deteriorates Sula Benet's claim as supported by Christ Bennett. In Exodus 30:22-

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<sup>18</sup> Chris Bennett, "Early/Ancient History," 21, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Francis Brown, D. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). Henceforth this work will be referred to as BDB.

<sup>20</sup> R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr., and B. K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999). Henceforth this work will be referred to as TWOT.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 2000). Henceforth this work will be referred to as BDAG.

<sup>22</sup> H. Liddell, *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

<sup>23</sup> Chris Bennett, "Early/Ancient History," 23.

33, God instructs Moses to make the sacred anointing oil. Among the ingredients are 250 shekels of קִנְיָה־בְּשֵׁם. If, as Sula Benet proposed, that is 250 shekels of cannabis, the sacred anointing oil would have had about 6.25 pounds of cannabis within one gallon of olive oil. Anyone who has been near cannabis when it is used knows the strong scent even a tiny bit gives off. Although not lit as with marijuana cigarettes, imagine about 6.25 pounds of cannabis being combined with cinnamon (also an ingredient in the mixture). Cannabis and cinnamon would make for an odd pair, and the cannabis smell would have been overwhelming. The argument for cannabis becomes more difficult when one considers the clear heathen and psychoactive elements to cannabis. How would the only true God command that such a plant be used to anoint furniture in his dwelling place? וְקִנְיָה־בְּשֵׁם is a hard phrase to nail down because it is so broad, but the best translations make the most sense when they use “aromatic cane”<sup>24</sup> or “fragrant calamus.”<sup>25</sup>

Bennett argues the reason cannabis fell out of use in Israelite religious customs was because “the pagan and foreign associations with the plant finally drive it underground.”<sup>26</sup> His proof is Jeremiah 6:20, where the LORD says, “What do I care about incense from Sheba or sweet calamus [וְקִנְיָה הַטָּיִב] from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable; your sacrifices do not please me.”<sup>27</sup> Bennett focuses too much on the immediate context of the verse, stressing the distance and pagan implications. The context starting at Jeremiah 6:16 makes it clear, however, that what displeases God is not the distant lands from which the plants came but the distant hearts that gave them. As long as the Israelites’ hearts were far from God, he did not care what lengths they went in order to keep up their religious formalism and superficial faith. He was angry that the Israelites had “not listened to [his] words and [had] rejected [his] law” (v. 19). God did not want expensive ceremonial formalism but sincere hearts that trusted in him. The issue clearly was not foreign cannabis; it was calloused hearts.

Chris Bennett does not stop at cannabis in the Old Testament. He also sees proof of cannabis being fundamental to the New Testament. He writes, “Following in the footsteps of Benet’s research, we were able to follow the history of the sacred anointing oil into the early

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<sup>24</sup> See New Revised Standard Version and English Standard Version.

<sup>25</sup> See New International Version (NIV) 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Chris Bennett, “Early/Ancient History,” 23.

<sup>27</sup> NIV 1984. For the rest of the paper all quotations from Scripture are taken from NIV 1984.

Christian period, particularly among heretical Gnostic Christian sects, who, along with pagan cults, were brutally banned at the inception of the Dark Ages and the rise of Catholicism.”<sup>28</sup>

Bennett’s argument is founded on the term *Christ*. Of course, Christ means the “anointed one,” just as the Hebrew word *Messiah* does. For Bennett, the New Testament term *Christ* is “making reference back to the original anointing oil as described in Exodus 30:23,”<sup>29</sup> the same oil Bennett believes contained cannabis. Bennett sees Exodus 30:23 as some sort of foreshadowing of Jesus’ ministry because he instructed his disciples to heal the sick with oil (Mark 6:13). The apparent reasoning for Jesus’ instructions is that Jesus knew the healing power of cannabis. It can be used to treat – among other diseases – epilepsy, which Bennett claims was misunderstood by the Gospel writers as demonic possession. Bennett concludes, “As Jesus and his followers began to spread the healing knowledge of cannabis around the ancient world, the singular *Christ* became the plural term *Christians*, that is, those who had been smeared or anointed with the holy oil.”<sup>30</sup>

This argument for New Testament cannabis use is even easier to refute than the one for the Old Testament. First of all, Bennett completely misunderstands the implications of Jesus’ title as the Christ. Jesus is the Christ because “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 10:38) to fulfill Old Testament prophecy and save souls, not just to heal sick bodies. Bennett leaves out Acts 10:38 in his proofs and he does not mention that in the Gospels Jesus is never anointed with a sacred oil resembling the one Moses was commanded to make. It also seems Bennett would have a hard time explaining why in Acts 11:23 – despite no mention of cannabis or healing oil – Luke states that “the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” Finally, Bennett clearly subscribes to negative criticism:

Although the idea that Jesus and his disciples used a healing cannabis ointment may seem far-fetched at first, when weighed against the popular alternative (one that is held by millions of believers) that Jesus performed healing miracles magically, through the power invested in him by the omnipotent Lord of the Universe, the case for ancient accounts of medicinal cannabis seems a far more likely explanation.<sup>31</sup>

Bennett has no time for miracles or a Savior who taught his followers about eternal salvation.

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<sup>28</sup> Chris Bennett, “Early/Ancient History,” 23. Note the anti-church tone with which he writes, as if modern Christianity is being purposefully led astray by established church bodies. There almost seems to be a hint of conspiracy theory, à la Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* novels.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

For this paper, what purpose does this discussion serve? Beyond reestablishing that cannabis certainly was *not* a part of the Old Testament ceremonial laws or a part of Jesus’ ministry, it serves as a warning for pastors who probably will have to discuss marijuana in their future years of ministry. Any WELS pastor would discredit Chris Bennett’s article because it supports poor exegesis and even worse hermeneutics. The arguments almost come across as ignorant and even absurd. When engaged in a discussion about marijuana, will the WELS pastor sound the same? Will he use sound arguments based on real facts or will he be dismissed as recycling old, unfounded myths? The rest of this thesis is aimed specifically at helping the pastor do the former – especially with members and prospects – with the guide of biblical principles.

## **Overview of Cannabis/Marijuana**

### *Defining Terms*

Cannabis is the name of a flowering plant genus that has been used throughout history for a variety of purposes, including food, fiber, fuel, medicine, and shelter.<sup>32</sup> Of course, recreational drug use has also been an application and is often the first use that comes to the minds of many Americans today. Cannabis has different subsets of species which are used specifically for the previously mentioned purposes. Humans have employed selection and breeding to cultivate unique varieties to meet those specific uses. “Differences among *Cannabis* types suggest that some were selected and improved to produce fibers, while other types were selected and improved for production of cannabinoids,”<sup>33</sup> which are the main chemicals that produce a desired effect. This can be seen in cannabis drug use today. Typically, there are two species of the cannabis plant used especially for recreational purposes – *cannabis indica* and *cannabis sativa*. Each has a general purpose within recreational use. Generally, “*indica*, nicknamed ‘in da couch,’ provides a deep feeling of relaxation or sleepiness compared with *sativa*, [nicknamed] ‘viva sativa,’ which provides a more energetic or uplifting high.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Lyle E. Craker, Ph.D, and Zoë Gardner, “The Botany of *Cannabis*” in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 35. Regarding its use as a fiber, the writer of this thesis would have to admit that during his grade school days he wore necklaces made from hemp – a type of fiber produced from cannabis plants.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Electa Draper, “Pot: Hundreds of Names, One Key Ingredient and Far-Reaching Effects,” *The Denver Post*, November 30, 2013, [http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci\\_24627637/pot-hundreds-names-one-key-ingredient-and-far#](http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_24627637/pot-hundreds-names-one-key-ingredient-and-far#) (accessed September 24, 2014).

What, then, is marijuana? That can be defined in two ways – technically and colloquially. As illustrated by the wording of Colorado’s Amendment 64, marijuana is often technically and legally defined as “all parts of the plant of the genus *cannabis* whether growing or not, the seeds thereof, the resin extracted from any part of the plant, and every compound, manufacture, salt, derivative, mixture, or preparation for the plant, its seeds, or its resin, including marihuana<sup>35</sup> concentrate... [It] does not include industrial hemp, nor does it include fiber produced from the stalks.”<sup>36</sup> A simpler summary states, “The term *marijuana* refers to the mixture of dried leaves and flowers”<sup>37</sup> of a cannabis plant.

In American culture, people normally use the word *marijuana* in its broadest sense, as any mixture or compound taken from a cannabis plant which is used to get high. When understood in this sense, a tremendous amount of other words become synonymous with marijuana. Perhaps the most common is the word *pot*. University of California, Berkeley linguist Geoffrey Nunberg explains the etymology:

Pot probably comes from the Mexican “potiguaya,” which is a word for seeds, which may come from the expression “potacion de guays,” which would mean “a sorrow soup,” which was some kind of concoction involving marijuana... How it got shortened to “pot” is unclear, but it was probably around the 1930s that Americans started using that word.<sup>38</sup>

People use many other slang words for cannabis or marijuana, and Appendix A offers a selection of those terms. The rest of this thesis will use the terms *cannabis* and *marijuana* as synonyms, recognizing the intent to use the parts (leaves and flowers, i.e. marijuana) of the whole plant (i.e., cannabis) in order to get a medicinal benefit or recreational high.

### *Brief History*

The discussion on cannabis in the Bible already highlighted how marijuana has a history of use dating back to the Ancient Near East kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon. Historians will point even farther back in history. “[Cannabis] was certainly cultivated in China by 4000 B.C.

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<sup>35</sup> This is an alternate spelling, often found in documents before the 1960s.

<sup>36</sup> Colorado Constitution, art. 18, sec. 16, cl. 2.f.

<sup>37</sup> William Holubeck, M.D., “Medical Risks and Toxicology,” in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 141.

<sup>38</sup> Hilary Brueck, “Gone to Pot: Which Words Should We Use to Talk about Weed?,” <http://www.cpr.org/news/story/gone-pot-which-words-should-we-use-talk-about-weed> (accessed September 9, 2014).

and in Turkestan by 3000 B.C... The first evidence of the medicinal use of cannabis is in an herbal published during the reign of the Chinese Emperor Chen Nung 5000 years ago.”<sup>39</sup> In addition to the previously mentioned cannabis use in the Ancient Near East among the Assyrians and Babylonians, cannabis also played a part among the Scythians (a people comprised of tribes that lived near the modern borders of Russia and China and then later moved to the ANE). The Scythians would use cannabis for rituals in their cult of the dead. During funerals of leaders the Scythians inhaled cannabis smoke in order to get high and honor the memory of the dead person.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, cannabis has an ancient history of use in order to heal the body and alter the mind. A modern perspective might label these uses as medicinal and ritual-recreational.<sup>41</sup>

Closer to home, America has a history of cannabis use as well, going back to the 1800s when cannabis was first included in the United States Pharmacopeia.<sup>42</sup> In fact, medicinal cannabis reached its height of popularity during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Lester Grinspoon repaints the scene, “From 1840 to 1900, more than 100 papers were published in... medical literature recommending it for various illnesses and discomforts. It could almost be said that physicians of a century ago knew more about cannabis than contemporary physicians do.”<sup>43</sup> Even groceries and drugstores began openly advertising cannabis.<sup>44</sup> The American West also used cannabis for hemp fabric and for intoxication. Texas border towns, influenced by the customs of Mexican immigrants, began smoking marijuana around 1900.<sup>45</sup>

Shortly thereafter federal and state governments began to regulate and then limit cannabis use. Why the subsequent legal events happened is a source of fierce debate. On one side, people

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<sup>39</sup> Lester Grinspoon, “History of Cannabis as a Medicine,” [http://www.maps.org/mmj/grinspoon\\_history\\_cannabis\\_medicine.pdf](http://www.maps.org/mmj/grinspoon_history_cannabis_medicine.pdf) (accessed October 7, 2014), 1. While evolutionary ideas probably affect his dating system, the point is still clear. Ancient peoples from across the globe used cannabis in a variety of ways.

<sup>40</sup> Chris Bennett, “Early/Ancient History,” 19.

<sup>41</sup> Modern Americans probably would not recognize the Scythian cult of the dead use as “recreational,” as thought of today. However, there seems to be undercurrent themes, as will be shown later.

<sup>42</sup> Julie Holland, “Introduction to Part Three,” in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 243.

<sup>43</sup> Lester Grinspoon, “History of Cannabis as a Medicine,” 2.

<sup>44</sup> Brent Staples, “The Federal Marijuana Ban Is Rooted in Myth and Xenophobia,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/opinion/high-time-federal-marijuana-ban-is-rooted-in-myth.html> (accessed September 10, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> Brent Staples, “The Federal Marijuana Ban Is Rooted in Myth and Xenophobia.” It is interesting to note that back then marijuana had a higher user rate in the western frontier states, just as western states today (like Colorado, California, and Washington) can often have a much higher marijuana user rate.



defend the state and federal governments, arguing that they wanted to control a drug from being carelessly passed around and to prevent causing serious adverse effects. On the other side of the interpretation, people accuse state and federal governments of having run a campaign of propaganda fueled by exaggerated side effects, racism, and xenophobia<sup>46</sup> and aimed at oppressing Mexican immigrants. They point to the 1920s when politicians began to substitute the word *marijuana* for *cannabis*, in order to attach the drug to negative images associated with Mexican immigrants.<sup>47</sup> Both sides of interpretation have legitimate points.

What is clear is that the present federal policy happened in stages and not swiftly. In 1906 the Pure Food and Drug Act required that marijuana be sold with a label of contents. In the following years states began passing local laws controlling cannabis. The Marijuana Tax Act of 1937 effectively outlawed marijuana, and by 1941 marijuana disappeared from the United States Pharmacopeia and National Formulary. Finally, in 1970 the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act (also known as the Controlled Substances Act) labeled marijuana a “Schedule 1” drug, meaning it has no medical use and a high potential for abuse.<sup>48</sup> As a result, marijuana became illegal altogether at the federal level, and this act still stands today.

Since 1970, states have enacted their own laws changing the legality or enforcement policies of marijuana within their borders. New Mexico was the first when it passed a law in 1978 allowing for medical use. Twenty-two other states (and the District of Columbia) have also made medicinal use legal. In addition, seventeen states (and the District of Columbia) have chosen to “decriminalize” marijuana. In areas where marijuana is decriminalized, the penalty for possession of small amounts of marijuana is equivalent to that of a minor traffic violation; it results in neither prison time nor a mark on a criminal record. The recreational use movement is the latest reaction to the Controlled Substances Act (CSA). In 2012 both Colorado and Washington passed laws at the state level legalizing small amounts of marijuana for recreational<sup>49</sup> purposes for anyone twenty-one years of age or older. Colorado’s Amendment 64 went into action on January 1, 2014. Washington’s policy became effective later that same year.

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<sup>46</sup> Brent Staples, “The Federal Marijuana Ban Is Rooted in Myth and Xenophobia.”

<sup>47</sup> David Malmo-Levine, “Recent History,” in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 31. Xenophobia and racism are also current hot button issues concerning the enforcement of marijuana laws.

<sup>48</sup> *Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970*, Public Law 91-513, § 202 (October 27, 1970), <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-84/pdf/STATUTE-84-Pg1236.pdf> (accessed November 3, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> “Recreational” practically covers every kind of use not already specified by medicinal laws. See Appendix A.

In November of 2014 two more states, Alaska and Oregon (as well as the District of Columbia), also voted to legalize marijuana for recreational purposes.

### *How Cannabis Works*

The key to understanding how cannabis affects humans is knowing how the endocannabinoid system works. Each human body has an endocannabinoid system, made up of numerous molecular receptors on cell surfaces. These receptors are activated when chemical compounds called cannabinoids attach themselves to those receptors. Cannabinoids have a very particular shape that matches up with two kinds of receptors. (It may be helpful to think of the cannabinoids as keys which open the locks, i.e. the receptors.)<sup>50</sup> Receptors labeled CB1 deal with the brain and other parts of the nervous system; when marijuana influences mental capacity and perceptions, it works through these receptors. The other kinds of receptors, CB2, deal with cells in the immune system and, when activated by certain cannabinoids, appear to help with pain and inflammation.<sup>51</sup>

The endocannabinoid system works within people whether they use marijuana or not. Much like the body produces its own morphine chemicals (called *endorphins*) the body produces its own cannabinoids. They are endogenous to the body and hence called *endocannabinoids*.<sup>52</sup> Put most simply, these endocannabinoids help regulate both the brain (by slowing down or speeding up neuronal activity) and the immune system (e.g., by creating feelings of hunger or controlling metabolism). Because cannabinoid receptors lie on cells all over the body, there is a wide range of physiological effects connected to the endocannabinoid system. This system even provides neuroprotection – “mechanisms and strategies used to protect against neuronal injury, degeneration, or death in the central nervous system.”<sup>53</sup> In summary, “the cannabinoid system helps regulate the function of other systems in the body, making it an integral part of the central

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<sup>50</sup> Sunil K. Aggarwal, M.D., Ph.D., and Gregory T. Carter, M.D., “Cannabinoids and Neuroprotection,” in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 296.

<sup>51</sup> Gregory L. Gerdeman, Ph.D., and Jason B. Schechter, Ph.D., “The Endocannabinoid System,” in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 53.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>53</sup> Sunil K. Aggarwal, M.D., Ph.D., and Gregory T. Carter, M.D., “Cannabinoids and Neuroprotection,” 296.

homeostatic modulator system, the check-and-balance molecular signaling in our bodies that keeps us at a healthy ‘98.6.’”<sup>54</sup>

Marijuana affects the human body because it contains about 60 cannabinoids of its own.<sup>55</sup> One is called cannabidiol. Cannabidiol is known mostly for its medicinal properties, especially because it is non-psychoactive. It does not produce a high like other cannabinoids, such as Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Unlike cannabidiol, THC is psychoactive and recreational users search for marijuana with high THC properties. While THC is similar to the endocannabinoids produced by the body, it differs from them in its operation. Take, for instance, the endocannabinoid anandamide. Anandamide attaches itself to cannabinoid receptors and helps decrease the excited state of brain cells activated by adrenaline.<sup>56</sup> Eventually the body naturally turns off this anandamide-induced response, and neurons return to their prior functioning state. Like the endocannabinoid anandamide, THC will attach itself to the body’s cannabinoid receptors. THC jumps on the receptors but, unlike anandamide, it stays there. THC essentially hijacks neurons and produces an effect that is longer and more pronounced than anandamide. This produces a high and can kill neurons if the response is not turned off in time.<sup>57</sup> Endocannabinoids are unable to produce these prolonged and pronounced effects; only external cannabinoids like THC can create a high.

The effects of THC, however, vary tremendously from person to person. When people use it recreationally, they do so to achieve a high (i.e., a state of pleasure). But more physiological effects can accompany THC use including – among others – motor instability, decreased reaction time, attention deficit, increased heart rate, and a distorted sense of time.<sup>58</sup> These effects can be unpredictable, especially with novice users. Endocannabinoid receptors are located throughout the body, affecting a wide range of body areas. Also, cannabis strains themselves differ because each plant can be unique; certain blends are designed to achieve particular effects. In short, people often react differently to the same kind of marijuana. “What

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<sup>54</sup> Sunil K. Aggarwal, M.D., Ph.D., and Gregory T. Carter, M.D., “Cannabinoids and Neuroprotection,” 296.

<sup>55</sup> Electa Draper, “Pot: Hundreds of Names, One Key Ingredient and Far-Reaching Effects.”

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

makes one person giggle will make someone else paranoid.”<sup>59</sup> The variance in highs and experiences draws people to marijuana, however. For them, it can be a new experience every time, or at least a new way to experience the same old thing. Roger Roffman explained his thinking in his book *Marijuana Nation*, “I later learned and came to appreciate the diversity of marijuana highs, the various circumstances in which being stoned<sup>60</sup> could enhance experience, and the differing levels of intensity that were possible.”<sup>61</sup>

After this basic overview of marijuana – explaining some of its terms, its history, and how it works – the paper will now turn towards the key issue for WELS pastors, “Can Christians use marijuana in good conscience?” But pastors really ought to split that question into different ones, reflecting the state of American culture, medicine, and politics. Thus, the initial question becomes two questions. First, “Can Christians use marijuana *medicinally* in good conscience?” The second question is, “Can Christians use marijuana *recreationally* in good conscience?” This paper will now explore each of these questions, ultimately allowing God’s inerrant and timeless word to determine the answers.

## **Medicinal Use**

### *Benefits*

History has revealed that ancient cultures and even nineteenth century Americans used marijuana for medicinal purposes. Supporters of medicinal marijuana will attest to this historical precedence in order to bolster their position. However, these supporters prefer to point to the hard data which medical science is starting to quantify more and more. The trump card that supporters play most often is, “Medicinal marijuana is less harmful than many other prescribed drugs.” They base their claims off marijuana’s “therapeutic ratio” (or therapeutic index). A therapeutic ratio “is a comparison of the amount of a therapeutic agent that causes the therapeutic effect to the amount that causes death. Quantitatively, it is the ratio given by the lethal dose

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<sup>59</sup> Electa Draper, “Pot: Hundreds of Names, One Key Ingredient and Far-Reaching Effects.”

<sup>60</sup> Being stoned means to be high (cf. Appendix A).

<sup>61</sup> Roger Roffman, *Marijuana Nation: One Man’s Chronicle of America Getting High: From Vietnam to Legalization* (New York City: Pegasus Books, 2014), 108. If the reader is looking for a book examining the societal trends of marijuana from the 1970s to the present, *Marijuana Nation* is worth the time. Roffman writes in an easy-to-understand manner, drawing from personal experience as a clinician, a college professor, and a marijuana user-abuser. He objectively presents risks and benefits.

divided by the therapeutic dose.”<sup>62</sup> The lower the therapeutic ratio, the more toxic and lethal it is; the higher it is, the safer it is. A drug with a lower ratio requires less intake for an overdose. A drug with a higher ratio requires more intake in order for an overdose to occur.

To illustrate, compare marijuana’s therapeutic ratio with the therapeutic ratio of lithium and digoxin,<sup>63</sup> two fairly common prescription drugs. Both lithium and digoxin have a therapeutic index of 2 to 3. Technically, marijuana has an unknown therapeutic ratio because marijuana “has never caused an overdose death.”<sup>64</sup> However, scientists have arrived at a therapeutic ratio approximation for marijuana. “It is estimated on the basis of extrapolation from animal data to be 20,000 to 40,000.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, someone who uses marijuana would have to try at least ten thousand times harder to overdose on it than on lithium or digoxin. Marijuana is less lethal than many prescription drugs. That is a quantified, objective fact that can have a shocking result when first heard, but it also can produce excitement. One doctor sums up the hope some have, “[Marijuana’s] potential for harm is so low compared to most pharmaceutical drugs in common practice that we ought to be intensively exploring its medical benefits and the best way to realize them.”<sup>66</sup>

What are some of the therapeutic effects marijuana produces in the human body? The list is growing, but this paper will look only at a limited amount and those which a pastor would most commonly run into when ministering to his members. Perhaps the most common therapeutic use is for pain in the widest sense. Recall that the endocannabinoid system deals in part with the central nervous system. Therefore, when external cannabinoids – such as cannabidiol – are administered into the body through marijuana, they impact the sense of pain. These cannabinoids can slow down the amount of pain messages that are being relayed to the

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<sup>62</sup> Julie Holland, “Foreword,” in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), xx. The quote is actually from the footnote on the bottom of that page.

<sup>63</sup> Doctors use lithium to treat bipolar disorders and digoxin to treat congestive heart failure.

<sup>64</sup> Julie Holland, “Foreword,” xxi. Proponents base much of their argument on this fact, i.e. that marijuana has never killed someone by an overdose, unlike alcohol, hard drugs, or even some prescriptions.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>66</sup> Julie Holland, M.D., “The Clinical Applications of Medical Marijuana: An Interview with Andrew Weil, M.D.,” in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 251.

brain. As a result, users feel less pain. Whether smoked or ingested through edibles,<sup>67</sup> the cannabinoids in marijuana affect all kinds of pain as well, from abnormal nerve function caused by diabetes or alcoholism to pain from surgery and even to chronic pain from arthritis.<sup>68</sup> When pain exists, inflammation often accompanies it. Marijuana appears to help relieve inflammation too. Studies indicate that cannabinoids can decrease inflammation in addition to easing pain.<sup>69</sup>

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and multiple sclerosis (MS) occur regularly throughout the United States and, as a result, within WELS congregations as well. Patients who have either disease suffer frequent pain, which cannabis can control to a certain extent, as shown above. Marijuana's therapeutic effects do not seem to end there, though. Cannabinoids – both those native to the body and those taken via marijuana – help neuroprotection. They slow down over-excited cell receptors, preventing damage. Cannabinoids also help to get rid of excess molecules that stress out motor neurons and cause cell death.<sup>70</sup> Marijuana appears to have promise as a way to improve mobility and slow down degeneration of neurons in patients who have ALS or MS. It may do so well enough that it could “ultimately limit the degree of chronic disability in these diseases.”<sup>71</sup> The studies are not completely conclusive, however. Scientists performed studies on animals, and further study with humans must be performed before firmer answers can be given.

Cancer shows up in congregations even more frequently than ALS or MS. Aside from the pain of the disease itself, chemotherapy treatments present major problems in their own right, particularly nausea and a lack of appetite. Cannabis helps relieve these symptoms. The state of New Mexico tracked about 250 cancer patients experiencing classic nausea and vomiting from 1978 (when it first legalized medicinal marijuana) to 1986. More than 90% of those who used marijuana to treat their symptoms “reported significant or total relief from nausea and vomiting.

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<sup>67</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>68</sup> Mark S. Wallace, M.D. and Ben Platt, M.D., “Pain Management,” in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 330, 331.

<sup>69</sup> Mitch Earlywine, Ph.D., “Pulmonary Harm and Vaporizers,” in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 153.

<sup>70</sup> Sunil K. Aggarwal, M.D., Ph.D., and Gregory T. Carter, M.D., “Cannabinoids and Neuroprotection,” 300, 301.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 300. A practicing doctor who went through my vicar congregation's Bible Information Course last year related an example of this. He knew of a person who suffered from MS. Previous prescriptions could not give her the ability to get out of her wheelchair. She then started using medicinal marijuana and, by reducing pain and regaining some mobility, was able to get out of the chair for periods of time. For him, this was a legitimate use.

Only three adverse effects were reported... anxiety reactions that were easily treated by simple reassurance.”<sup>72</sup> A couple decades later, some doctors are still hopeful that scientists will conduct more studies, further illuminating marijuana’s applications as an appetite stimulant for cancer patients and even as possible protection against cancer itself.<sup>73</sup>

### *Risks and Drawbacks*

Historical and recent proofs of positive medicinal effects, however, must come with caution. Even with some promising studies, the body of evidence still needs quite a bit of work before the medical community can openly promote or confidently discourage cannabis as medicine. Scientists still need to prove that the drug works consistently in the ways some tests hint at. If it does, they must also answer how best to administer the drug. Just as importantly, scientists need to understand the long term effects of such use.

The medical community rightly places a high emphasis on precision, especially when prescribing doses of a certain drug. In a hospital, nurses and doctors carefully administer proper dosages to patients after consulting the notes. If patients go home with a prescription, they have the doctor’s orders detailing how much medication they should take and when, whether it is acne medication or Vicodin pills. That is how prescriptions work; they specify in detail how much should be used and when. That is a fundamental principle of modern pharmacology.

Marijuana presents a problem with those normal rules of pharmacology. Kari Franson, an associate dean and professor with the University of Colorado Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, explains that cannabis is not strictly pharmacological. Doctors and patients cannot simply administer a consistent dose and confidently declare that a consistent response will happen.<sup>74</sup> For each patient, it is guess-and-check. That is the opposite of how ibuprofen works. People can look at a bottle of ibuprofen, read the instructions, follow those instructions, and be confident that pain will go away. Granted, some may double the recommended dosage if they have a bigger body. However, they still confidently know that whatever consistent dose they take will produce a consistent response.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Lester Grinspoon, “History of Cannabis as a Medicine,” 16.

<sup>73</sup> Julie Holland, M.D., “The Clinical Applications of Medical Marijuana: An Interview with Andrew Weil, M.D.,” 251.

<sup>74</sup> Electa Draper, “Pot: Hundreds of Names, One Key Ingredient and Far-Reaching Effects.”

<sup>75</sup> The consideration here throws out the possibility of a built-up tolerance to ibuprofen or marijuana.

The way people administer marijuana into their system is a major reason why it is not pharmacological like ibuprofen or other common drugs. People administer marijuana through three common methods. The most common is smoking; people either roll up marijuana into a cigarette<sup>76</sup> and smoke that or put an amount into the end of a small pipe, light the marijuana with fire, and breathe in the smoke produced. Another common method is called vaporizing;<sup>77</sup> this method heats up the marijuana, producing a cannabinoid-filled vapor which is inhaled. Vaporizing avoids the smoke inhalation caused by burning marijuana. Many users also eat marijuana-infused foods, often called “edibles.” Edibles are food products prepared with marijuana in them. When eaten, they administer the cannabinoids.

Smoking and vaporization are probably the most common means, but Mahmoud ElSohly (a pharmacist and the director of the only federally approved marijuana farm) calls smoking the drug “a totally unacceptable pharmaceutical way of delivering the drug.”<sup>78</sup> As for vaporization, he does acknowledge that it “reduces the negative effects of smoking”<sup>79</sup> but he still does not approve of its use for medically administering the drug. The problem lies in the fact that it is very hard to administer a consistent dose, especially for novice users. He explains:

Remember with that vaporizer, if the subjects are like you and me and have never smoked marijuana, they are really going to have a hard time dealing with this [delivering and receiving the correct amount of medication]. This vaporizer and the smoking material are not designed for the average subjects who are in need of a pharmaceutical preparation to deal with their ailments; it’s for people who are used to smoking marijuana.<sup>80</sup>

The manner of application differs greatly from opening up a bottle, putting the prescribed amount in your mouth, and washing it down with a glass of water. Along with this trouble, different strains of cannabis have different amounts of the needed cannabinoids, so quantifying a dose becomes difficult. Each strain would require a different amount.

As long as smoking and vaporization remain the most commonly used methods of application, concerns will rise over potential respiratory and pulmonary problems. Smoking

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<sup>76</sup> Frequently called a “joint” (cf. Appendix A).

<sup>77</sup> It has become so common that the shortened slang term “vape” was Oxford Dictionaries’ Word of the Year 2014 (<http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2014/11/oxford-dictionaries-word-year-vape/>). The same process works with tobacco.

<sup>78</sup> Julie Holland, M.D., “The Government’s Pot Far: An Interview with Mahmoud A. ElSohly, Ph.D.,” in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 279.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.



tobacco has well-documented negative effects on the human lungs, chief among them being lung cancer. Does smoking marijuana lead to similar problems? To this point in the research process, “rates of lung cancer in marijuana smokers who do not use cigarettes<sup>81</sup> are comparable to the rates in nonsmokers.”<sup>82</sup> If people smoke marijuana only to reduce pain for the duration of chemo treatments and not habitually afterward, this risk would go down even further. However, “cannabis could still harm the respiratory system without creating lung cancer.”<sup>83</sup> Blocked airways could result from smoking marijuana. Vaporization seems to be helpful, but scientists have not concluded that vaporization prevents similar airway problems. The bottom line is that although cannabis use through smoking or vaporization appears not to be as harmful as smoking tobacco, plenty of problems are still possible. Again, more long term studies must be performed.

Much of the above information sounds positive, even after acknowledging some of the possible medical drawbacks or risks. Aside from the medical risks and drawbacks, though, the political ones remain. Medicinal marijuana is still illegal at the federal level. As noted previously, the federal government banned its use in 1970 through the Controlled Substances Act. That law’s reasoning stated it has no known medicinal properties and a high probability of abuse. Naturally, proponents of medicinal marijuana would strongly object to both points, but objections have not changed the federal law. The government to which Americans pledge allegiance still labels medicinal marijuana illegal, despite twenty-three states legalizing its use.

However, it must also be understood that the federal government has not gone after individual patients in those states. If patients are practicing the state’s law, they have not been historically in danger of prosecution from the federal government. Put simply, the federal government feels they have bigger fish to fry. This conflict between state and federal laws will be dealt with more fully in the section on recreational marijuana, but for now it should be noted that the situations differ in ethics. Medicinal marijuana deals with ethics of care and compassion. Recreational use is more about personal rights and the ethics of obtaining pleasure.

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<sup>81</sup> Tobacco cigarettes are meant here.

<sup>82</sup> Mitch Earlywine, Ph.D., “Pulmonary Harm and Vaporizers,” 153. Explanations often given are that 1) marijuana smokers smoke less product and, therefore, inhale less smoke; 2) the lungs do not have any cannabinoid receptors but they do have plenty of nicotine receptors; and 3) nicotine prevents damaged cells from dying, preventing new cells from replacing them and improving the respiratory system.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

## *Biblical Principles*

God gave his inspired word in order that sinners might hear the gospel and their souls be healed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Bible's purpose is not to be a handbook that tells its readers what dietary rules to follow, how to come up with the best retirement plan, or even how to practice medicine. The Bible's chief concern is care for souls over care for bodies. Yet God is still the Almighty who preserves his creation and creatures by richly and daily providing "all [they] need to keep body and life"<sup>84</sup> as Luther so beautifully wrote. Does medicinal marijuana fall within "all that I need"? If so, how do Christians wrestle with the risks and drawbacks previously discussed? The pastor, as *Seelsorger*, can have a role in helping parishioners sift through these issues.

Pastors do well to remember the obvious. Throughout the pages of his word, God gives a tremendous number of examples where people are healed of ailments, both through natural and miraculous means. The rest of this paper could be spent just exploring these circumstances, but time and space allow for listing only a few. Some miraculous healings that may stick out include the Israelites and the bronze serpent (Numbers chapter 21), the cleansing of Naaman's leprosy (2 Kings chapter 5), and the healing of Saul's blindness (Acts chapter 9). Not only does God have the power to heal the body, he is also concerned about his creatures' health. In fact, quite a few psalms make that very appeal to God. Psalm writers pray to God in confidence, thanking him for past healings and asking for future ones. The Holy Spirit led David to write so beautifully, "Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases" (Psalm 103:2,3).

In addition to providing accounts of miraculous healings, the Bible also includes examples of people using natural medicine to aid in recovery. When God promised that King Hezekiah would live after an illness struck him, Isaiah instructed, "Prepare a poultice of figs and apply it to the boil, and he will recover" (Isaiah 38:21). In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan cared for the injured man when he poured oil and wine on the wounds.<sup>85</sup> The Apostle Paul also instructed Timothy to add a little wine to his regimen "because of [his] stomach and [his] frequent illnesses" (1 Timothy 5:23). One also wonders what sort of medical

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<sup>84</sup> Martin Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed as found in David Kuske's version of the Small Catechism (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998).

<sup>85</sup> I wonder if those who believed Jesus healed with cannabis insist that this oil was cannabis-infused. I did not come across anyone who makes this argument.

insight Dr. Luke shared with Paul during the time they spent together. The Bible lists cases where natural medicine has legitimate uses. Can the same be said about marijuana? Based on the findings cited earlier and in other studies, at the very least, I believe we can answer, “Yes, marijuana does have legitimate uses as medicine, if only in limited cases.”

Obviously, Jesus provides the perfect example for pastors both as caretakers of souls and bodies. Jesus’ entire ministry shows just how concerned and compassionate he was about people’s health. The miracles he performed in the Bible are plentiful, and John supposed that if all of Jesus’ miracles were recorded, “even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25). That is why prayers in worship often address Jesus as the Great Physician. After he ascended into heaven, Jesus worked through his apostles to continue miraculous healings. All of this, of course, was Jesus’ way of getting people’s attention in order that the gospel might be more clearly heard, but pastors still want to imitate Christ’s deep concern that believers receive the best care they can get.

What pastors should *not* imitate is the level of involvement Jesus displayed in people’s health decisions. As the omnipotent and omniscient Lord, Jesus knew what needed to be done, knew how to do it, and could do that very thing. Sinful pastors, despite best intentions, do not have those perfect attributes. Plus, American culture differs as well. Laws limit how much a pastor can know regarding diagnosis and treatment without the patient’s consent. Even when laws do not put up barriers, personal convictions and concerns for privacy may motivate members to play coy. In such cases, the pastor dare not barge in, force out information, and then give his unsolicited opinion. If family members ask him to weigh in, then he certainly can do so with thoughtfulness and respect. Pastors do not actively seek to become medical consultants in the hospitable room and certainly do not do so in the pulpit.

Medicinal marijuana should be handled in an even more delicate and private manner for two reasons: conscience and witness.<sup>86</sup> In states where medicinal marijuana is still illegal, the discussion should not even get that far. Because it is illegal, Christians should not use it. But in the twenty-three states where it is legal, pastors must consider the issues of conscience and witness. How might use of medicinal marijuana put up obstacles to the gospel and others’ faith?

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<sup>86</sup> Brett McCracken, Dónal P.O’Mathúna, and Edward T. Welch, “Should Christians Smoke Medical Marijuana? Pot Morality,” *Christianity Today* 55, no. 6 (Je 2011): 62, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=9eead3b7-6682-4ff6-912e-b5d080ec1cd6%40sessionmgr4004&vid=3&hid=4101> (accessed August 8, 2014).

First of all, the patient's conscience must be convinced that medicinal marijuana is acceptable before the government and God. Regarding the former, federal and state governments have not done a good job sending a clear message about marijuana. While medicinal marijuana is illegal at the federal level, patients who use it within the bounds of state laws are not in any real danger of prosecution. Still, is medicinal use in opposition to the representatives God placed over us at the federal level? This is one of the key issues of Paul's discussion of government in Romans chapter 13. I maintain there is *some* wiggle room. Because the federal government is not prosecuting individuals who use medicinal marijuana, do they even consider medicinal marijuana users to be "those who do wrong" (Romans 13:3)? That does not seem to be the case. One of government's chief God-given roles is to punish the wrongdoer, as based on their own laws formulated by human reason. It seems that the federal government's lack of action against medicinal marijuana indicates a change in rationale. They have allowed some gray area to exist.

Add in the other factors, and the case for medicinal use becomes stronger. Medicinal marijuana involves protecting or improving the function of God-given bodies, and God himself has shown concern for the health of his creatures. True medicinal marijuana is *not* about seeking a pleasure or high. In fact, medicinal marijuana can be cultivated so that it contains high levels of cannabidiol (a non psychoactive cannabinoid) and low levels of THC (the cannabinoid that makes people high). Therefore, medicinal marijuana can be used in such a way that the head high is limited; therapeutic effects then occur mostly within the problematic areas of the body.<sup>87</sup> Secondly, medicinal marijuana can be used for a relatively short time in many cases. For instance, a Christian cancer patient could take marijuana for only as long as the chemo treatments and their nasty side effects run. Thus, when governed by a godly respect for bodies as a gift from God and used within the scope of local laws, Christians can use medicinal marijuana in good conscience.

Chronic pain, however, presents a potential problem for abuse. While it could very well help members with ALS or MS, plenty of Americans abuse the medicinal system for recreational purposes. They use medicinal marijuana laws for very subjective chronic issues, just so that they can have a way of using the drug for recreational purposes. They become "a form of back door

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<sup>87</sup> Benjamin Hochman and Patrick Saunders, "Athletes and Pot: Legalized Marijuana in a League of Its Own," *The Denver Post*, December 31, 2013, [http://www.denverpost.com/sports/ci\\_24809768/athletes-and-pot-legalized-marijuana-league-its-own#](http://www.denverpost.com/sports/ci_24809768/athletes-and-pot-legalized-marijuana-league-its-own#) (accessed September 23, 2014).

legalization for buyers, many of whom [have] no valid medical need.”<sup>88</sup> Often, their claims are not all that serious and, as one essayist puts it, “mostly a joke.”<sup>89</sup> It is that last observation that becomes an issue for medicinal marijuana use. While the Christian using medicinal marijuana may have a clear conscience, medicinal use still has the potential to offend other Christians or even turn off an unbeliever to the gospel. Christ reminds Christians that they are the salt of the earth and then commands them to continue being salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13). Personal conduct and love for neighbor play key roles in that endeavor. If Christians use marijuana as medicine, it must be done in a way that is as private as possible lest offense occur, doing harm to the gospel.

The paper will discuss more fully the issues of government, conscience, and offense later under the section of recreational marijuana. Let this suffice for topic of medicinal marijuana. Enough scientific evidence exists to believe that marijuana can have legitimate uses, especially for extremely difficult and painful cases like cancer, ALS, and MS. The government’s lack of zeal to prosecute those who abide by state laws provides some gray area of which Christians could take advantage. Pastors, however, will temper that freedom in private one-on-one counseling. They need to make clear that government gray area does not legitimize abuse of the situation. When possible, pastors need to investigate motivation and other options. If other proven and federally legal drugs are available and if they work for the patient, in all cases those drugs are to be preferred. If marijuana is a legitimate option, pastors will then focus the discussion on Christian stewardship, i.e. the God-pleasing way to take care of bodies as beautiful gifts from God. So, if a Christian is honestly wrestling with the issue and asks, “Pastor, can I use medicinal marijuana in good conscience?” the pastor – with a loving word of caution – can confidently answer, “Yes.”

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<sup>88</sup> Roger Roffman, *Marijuana Nation*, 291. As an illustration: I worked as a golf course grounds crew member for many summers. One of my coworkers used medicinal marijuana on the job, claiming it helped ease shoulder pain resulting from a car crash years prior. I found it telling that he often smoked it on the clock doing jobs that were not very labor intensive, like driving a mower. Then, when we would play golf after work, he rarely smoked, despite the strain a golf swing can put on the human body. I wonder what he was treating – problems at home and work or physical problems.

<sup>89</sup> Brett McCracken, Dónal P. O’Mathúna, and Edward T. Welch, “Should Christians Smoke Medical Marijuana? Pot Morality,” 62.

## Recreational Marijuana

### *What Is Recreational Marijuana Use?*

Recreational marijuana use covers a vast number of motivations and circumstances. Therefore, the best definition for recreational marijuana is broad. This paper defines recreational use in this way: any use of marijuana that does not follow a medical recommendation or prescription.<sup>90</sup> The qualifying word “recreational” can present some misunderstanding. When Americans use the adjective “recreational,” they most often think of physical activity. City-organized sports programs are often called “recreational (or ‘rec’) leagues.” Americans love to take their boats or jet skis on the water in summertime and do recreational boating, quite possibly towing water skiers or tubers. Recreational marijuana conjures up different images. Fairly or unfairly, people associate recreational marijuana use with a sedated state and lack of motivation to do anything. When people smoke marijuana, it is most commonly not in order to participate in physical activity normally connected to the word “recreational.” Images of sedated pleasure are consistent with historical characteristics of what people now call recreational use. Three categorical uses stick out: for music, for art, and for general relaxing.

Marijuana has carved out a niche in the music scene, both for artists and listeners. Roger Roffman quoted a friend as saying, “I’m often a better musician when I’m stoned, more tuned in to the structure of a piece I’m playing... Being stoned also gives me access to a kind of thinking that is creative and imaginative.”<sup>91</sup> Earlier in that same book, Roffman recounted the first time he got high on marijuana. A couple, with whom he was friends, invited him to smoke marijuana before listening to some music in their home. Roffman went on to describe how the depth of perception exploded during that high. He heard and felt things which music had never brought about before. For him it was a very transformative experience. Many of the same things can be said for artists and those who want to appreciate art. For them, marijuana serves as a way to heighten their senses or lock into untapped inspiration. They become able to express or see a whole new world while high. Many times people use marijuana simply to sit and relax, drawing comparisons to having a beer or glass of wine after work. TV shows become funnier, stressful thoughts float away, and relaxation reaches a deeper and more satisfying level.

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<sup>90</sup> Merriam Webster gives the following definition of what a recreational drug is: “a drug... used without medical justification for its psychoactive effects often in the belief that occasional use of such a substance is not habit-forming or addictive” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/recreational%20drug>).

<sup>91</sup> Roger Roffman, *Marijuana Nation*, 115.

Who uses marijuana in a recreational way? According to an April 2013 Pew Research survey throughout the United States “roughly half of adults (48%) say they have ever tried marijuana, the highest percentage ever.”<sup>92</sup> The percentage of people who used within the last year, however, dropped significantly. The same survey recorded that “about one-in-ten (12%) say they have used marijuana in the past year.”<sup>93</sup> Among 2013 high school seniors, 36.4% had used it in the past year, and 22.7% used within the past month. Daily users account for 6.5% of those teens surveyed.<sup>94</sup>

Given its political situation as the pioneer in legalizing recreational marijuana, Colorado provides a unique subset of the national population. A July 2014 Quinnipiac poll found that 16% of Coloradans had used marijuana recreationally in 2014; 83% had not done so.<sup>95</sup> Of those who use it recreationally in Colorado, 23% do so nearly every day.<sup>96</sup> The most frequent users account for the vast majority (66.9%) of the demand in Colorado.<sup>97</sup> Rare users (less than once per month and about one-third of all users) take up a mere 0.3% of Colorado’s total demand.<sup>98</sup> It is striking how much of the demand comes from the heavy users alone.

### *A Vast Chasm*

Before a pastor can explore the issues regarding the debate over recreational marijuana, he must realize the dichotomy between opponents and proponents. To be sure, as with any sort of debate, a fairly level-headed middle party exists, but many people have strong feelings – either

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<sup>92</sup> Pew Research Center, “Majority Now Supports Legalizing Marijuana,” 9.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>94</sup> National Institute on Drug Abuse, “Monitoring the Future Study: Trends in Prevalence of Various Drugs,” <http://www.drugabuse.gov/trends-statistics/monitoring-future/monitoring-future-study-trends-in-prevalence-various-drugs> (accessed October 11, 2014).

<sup>95</sup> Quinnipiac University Poll, “Limit Marijuana to Home, Members-Only Clubs, Colorado Voters Tell Quinnipiac University Poll; 50% Back Supreme Court on Contraception,” 4, [http://www.quinnipiac.edu/images/polling/co/co07212014\\_Cenk53r.pdf](http://www.quinnipiac.edu/images/polling/co/co07212014_Cenk53r.pdf) (accessed on October 12, 2014).

<sup>96</sup> Miles K. Light, Adam Orens, Brian Lewandowski, Todd Pickton, “Market Size and Demand for Marijuana in Colorado,” The Marijuana Policy Group, 3, <http://www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite?blobcol=urldata&blobheadername1=Content-Disposition&blobheadername2=Content-Type&blobheadervalue1=inline%3B+filename%3D%22Market+Size+and+Demand+Study%2C+July+9%2C+2014.pdf%22&blobheadervalue2=application%2Fpdf&blobkey=id&blobtable=MungoBlobs&blobwhere=1252008574534&ssbinary=true> (accessed October 11, 2014). Compare that 23% with a 17% share nationwide, as cited by the same study.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

for use or against it. Obviously, proponents and opponents will disagree. That is the nature of debate. But the marijuana debate has been known to devolve into sensationalism, over simplifications, and even attacks on character. Naturally, a breakdown in worthwhile discussion occurs, and both sides can be blamed.

Opponents of recreational marijuana have been guilty of overstating their case. The quintessential illustration of this is the movie *Reefer Madness* released in the late 1930s.<sup>99</sup> The movie is a poster child for marijuana paranoia. The film's opening minutes declare, "More vicious, more deadly even than these soul-destroying drugs [opium, morphine, and heroin] is the menace of marijuana." That simply is not true. In a "fanciful" manner,<sup>100</sup> the film portrays assumed, but scientifically unfounded, side effects and characteristics of marijuana highs (such as murder, rape, and suicide). The whole film has the feel of propaganda, and at times it becomes hard to take the film seriously. Recreational users certainly do not take it seriously, and as a form of entertainment, they will get high and watch *Reefer Madness* for laughs.

Opponents of recreational marijuana have changed their tactics since *Reefer Madness*, but some still hold onto (at best) shaky science. A common objection is that marijuana serves as a "gateway drug." They claim that using marijuana becomes a gateway to using harder drugs like cocaine or heroin. Science is closer to disproving that statement rather than confirming it.<sup>101</sup> People also confidently assert that marijuana will cause lung cancer or respiratory problems, much like tobacco does. That is a possible danger, but the most recent studies suggest tobacco still serves as a bigger threat. Finally, fierce opponents sometimes resort to attacks on character. They lump all recreational users as dysfunctional stoners and pot heads who lack any motivation to be productive members of society.

On the other side of the debate, proponents of recreational marijuana can overstate their case as well. Where *Reefer Madness* exaggerated marijuana habits into paranoia, recent movie comedies completely make light of recreational use. Consider the highly successful *Harold &*

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<sup>99</sup> *Reefer* is a slang term for a marijuana cigarette (cf. Appendix A). The whole film can be viewed on YouTube by searching the title.

<sup>100</sup> The Editorial Board, "Repeal Prohibition, Again," *The New York Times*, [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/07/27/opinion/sunday/high-time-marijuana-legalization.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/07/27/opinion/sunday/high-time-marijuana-legalization.html?_r=0) (accessed September 10, 2014).

<sup>101</sup> Ryan Vandrey, Ph.D, and Margaret Haney, Ph.D. "How Real Is the Risk of Addiction?," in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 195.



*Kumar* franchise or 2008's *Pineapple Express*. To be sure, they are clearly fictional, but these movies still portray (heavy) recreational marijuana use as something lighthearted and innocent. Highs are not only enjoyable for those under the influence, they serve as viewing entertainment for others.

Staunch proponents also rely on less-than-convincing science at times. As often as opponents appeal to the gateway drug argument, proponents offer the fact that no one has ever died from a lethal overdose of cannabis. The statement is valid, but “it is also true that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a ‘lethal overdose’ of tobacco. To the extent that tobacco causes deaths, it does so through the cumulative effects.”<sup>102</sup> Just because something is not lethal in small doses does not mean it is always harmless. Proponents also place a high emphasis on personal experiences and anecdotal evidence.<sup>103</sup> Part of that is due to the small body of research, particularly long term research, but I also think postmodernism has a role as well. Personal experiences and anecdotal evidence hit home because those are key parts of postmodernism's spirit. Personal experience is trump, and other people's experiences follow closely behind.

With this vast fixed chasm of opinions in mind, pastors must reexamine the question, “Can Christians recreationally use cannabis in good conscience?” Lest they fall into the trappings of overstatements and *ad hominem* attacks, they must approach the question as unbiased as possible. Pastors will examine and study scientific facts, others' personal experiences, and politics with an objective perspective, being aware of their possible biases but not letting them influence the examination. Most of all, pastors must remain firmly rooted in a christocentric, careful study of Scripture. God's word will guide their decision making.

### *The Issues from the Secular Perspective*

The issue of legal recreational marijuana is not just a spiritual one, meant only for pastors and parishioners. The secular world debates the topic as well, although doing so strictly with human reason. A WELS pastor could consider some of these issues tangential and maybe even irrelevant to his main concerns as a *Seelsorger*, but it is beneficial to understand how society at

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<sup>102</sup> Damon Linker, “Going to Pot?,” *First Things*, no. 117 (N 2001): 6, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=d90a3bf7-f4cf-4237-85b1-ec4df7ac69d3%40sessionmgr115&vid=3&hid=117> (accessed August 25, 2014). Linker's point is that just as it is essentially impossible to overdose on marijuana in one smoking session, it is nearly as hard to overdose on tobacco cigarettes in one sitting. The required amounts for an overdose for both marijuana and tobacco are extremely large.

<sup>103</sup> Electa Draper, “Pot: Hundreds of Names, One Key Ingredient and Far-Reaching Effects.”

large is wrestling with the issues. The pastor will be better equipped to cut through any fluff and get down to the spiritual heart of it all.

In light of four states (Colorado, Washington, Alaska, and Oregon) having voted to legalize recreational marijuana within the last couple of years, the political issues come to the forefront. Federal law still clearly labels marijuana as an illegal drug. On paper, it is a black and white issue. But arguments for individual and states' rights coupled with a relaxed federal enforcement policy complicate it. For some, recreational use is a fundamental right for an individual. An editorial piece in Colorado argued that Americans should be "allowed to choose what goes into their bodies, enjoying a substance older than this country itself."<sup>104</sup> Others argue the opposite. A writer for *The New York Times* argued that it is *not* a fundamental right to be supported by the federal government.<sup>105</sup> The editorial board of *The New York Times* concluded the same and stated that the decision regarding use "[belongs] at the state level."<sup>106</sup> That said, even some Coloradans have reservations about letting states decide by a popular vote. Dr. Christian Hopfer explains his opinion, "There's something crazy about the feds labeling cannabis Schedule I and states legalizing it. It strikes me as a bad way of doing public policy... We need to sort it out. But we have declared it a medicine by popular vote."<sup>107</sup> Tax dollars and racism come into play as well. Many argue that law enforcement and the penal system are wasting enormous amounts of tax money by pursuing relatively harmless marijuana offenses when that money could be spent on more dangerous situations. Hand in hand with that argument is that law enforcement practices racial profiling, purposefully targeting African Americans much more than whites.<sup>108</sup> The political discussion has many hot button issues including states' rights, spending of public resources, and law enforcement practices.

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<sup>104</sup> Jake Browne, "Opinion: Talking 'Bout Our Rights and the Sweet Smell of Freedom," *The Cannabist Staff*, September 10, 2014, <http://www.thecannabist.co/2014/09/10/opinion-marijuana-smell-let-freedom-stink/19451/> (accessed September 14, 2014).

<sup>105</sup> Firestone, David, "Let States Decide on Marijuana," *The New York Times*, July 27, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/27/opinion/sunday/high-time-let-states-decide-on-marijuana.html?opinion-series> (accessed September 10, 2014).

<sup>106</sup> The Editorial Board, "Repeal Prohibition, Again."

<sup>107</sup> Electa Draper, "Pot: Hundreds of Names, One Key Ingredient and Far-Reaching Effects." Dr. Hopfer is an associate professor of psychiatry at University of Colorado Hospital's Center for Dependency, Addiction, and Recovery.

<sup>108</sup> Brent Staples, "The Federal Marijuana Ban Is Rooted in Myth and Xenophobia."

People also frame the debate within tobacco vs. marijuana. Proponents for recreational use argue that if a proven cancerous substance like tobacco is legal, marijuana should be too because scientists have not yet found a clear connection between marijuana and cancer. The paper now repeats a previous point: scientists do not have a very large body of study regarding long term use. Along with the pulmonary concerns raised earlier, opponents will point out that “marijuana smoke contains both mutagens and several known carcinogens, similar to those found in tobacco smoke. In fact, some studies found the concentration of these carcinogens to be higher in marijuana smoke than tobacco smoke.”<sup>109</sup> It appears that smoking both tobacco and smoking marijuana pose health risks.

Even more common than the tobacco vs. marijuana debate is the alcohol vs. marijuana debate. Alcohol and marijuana have similarities in that they both affect brain functions, inhibiting judgment and motor skills. Those in favor of recreational marijuana legalization sometimes draw a sharp distinction between being drunk and being stoned. As part of a series on marijuana in *The New York Times*, Philip Boffey claims, “[Marijuana’s] effects are mostly euphoric and mild, whereas alcohol turns some drinkers into barroom brawlers, domestic abusers or maniacs behind the wheel.”<sup>110</sup> The latter half of that statement certainly carries truth, but note the qualifying word “some.” Boffey bases part of his argument on extreme instances of alcohol use while saying that marijuana routinely has a happier and more stoic influence.

Opponents build a case against recreational marijuana using the same principles of attack – using uncommon events to try to support their point. Opponents point to two cases in the Denver area within the last year where marijuana seems to have played a major role in tragic situations. A college student from Wyoming leapt to his death from a hotel balcony in Denver. He had traveled to the city and ingested marijuana edibles, which seemed to have caused a severe case of psychosis and hostile behavior before leading to his suicide.<sup>111</sup> Attention has also turned to a murder case in Denver where a husband killed his wife during a very erratic episode in April 2014. The man tested negative for alcohol and prescription drugs but did test positive for

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<sup>109</sup> William Holubeck, M.D., “Medical Risks and Toxicology,” 152.

<sup>110</sup> Philip M. Boffey, “What Science Says about Marijuana,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/31/opinion/what-science-says-about-marijuana.html?opinion-series> (accessed September 10, 2014).

<sup>111</sup> John Ingold, “Denver Coroner: Man Fell to Death after Eating Marijuana Cookies,” *The Denver Post*, April 2, 2014, [http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci\\_25475533/denver-coroner-man-fell-death-after-eating-marijuana](http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_25475533/denver-coroner-man-fell-death-after-eating-marijuana) (accessed November 21, 2014).

THC.<sup>112</sup> That positive test will be dissected most thoroughly not only by those lawyers directly involved but also by those on both sides of the recreational marijuana debate. Again, these two tragic cases lie outside the norm of recreational use, but people easily spin them to their side of the argument.

The general public views the above talking points through the lens of each person's human rationale. As our nation, at the federal and state levels, tries to sort everything out, the discussion will run on "the gasoline... of reason,"<sup>113</sup> to borrow a phrase from Professor Daniel Deutschlander's book on church and state. Both sides of the issue will be able to use sound human logic to support their own personal views, whether for or against recreational marijuana. As members of the earthly kingdom, pastors find interest in these topics and their reasoning, but their main concern lies in the spiritual implications of recreational marijuana use. The church looks at many of the same issues, but does so with a different view. For WELS pastors, that perspective is *sola scriptura* with an eye to the Book of Concord. That perspective leads WELS pastors to ask different and deeper questions than the general public. The rest of the thesis will raise questions unique to a confessional Lutheran position and then answer those questions on the basis of Christ's work and biblical principles.

### *The Issues from the Scriptural Perspective*

Just as the secular perspective has to juggle all sorts of different issues and situations, so does the spiritual, biblical perspective. Within the realm of Christianity, confessional Lutheran pastors raise different questions based on their biblical hermeneutic and concern for people's souls. Politics comes into the discussion, but it does so as a 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment issue, recognizing local, state, and federal governments as God's authoritative representatives. Reasonable politics must give way to scriptural principles. Like the general public, pastors will want to explore how marijuana use could adversely affect the body, cognition, and emotion, but they will do so through the lens of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, seeking to take care of life because it is God's gift.

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<sup>112</sup> Jordan Steffen, "Few and Tricky Options for Defense Attorneys in Observatory Park Case," *The Denver Post*, September 9, 2014, [http://www.denverpost.com/marijuana/ci\\_26470985/few-and-tricky-options-defense-attorneys-observatory-park](http://www.denverpost.com/marijuana/ci_26470985/few-and-tricky-options-defense-attorneys-observatory-park) (accessed November 21, 2014). Marijuana toxicology has also been a point of investigation and discussion in the tragic fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014.

<sup>113</sup> Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Civil Government: God's Other Kingdom* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998), 76.

WELS pastors then take the discussion into areas that the general public cannot: spiritual offense and sanctification.

#### 4th Commandment

“Can Christians use marijuana in good conscience?” For decades the answer was easy. Pastors and Christians rightly appealed to the political situation and said, “No. Christians cannot. It’s illegal and, therefore, would be a sin against God’s representatives, against God himself, and against his 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment.” This paper has already outlined how – although the official federal law has remained the same – states have adopted their own policies. Some states have decriminalized marijuana, legalized its medicinal use, and/or legalized its recreational use. Given those facts and the federal enforcement of its own law, how do pastors now answer the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment issue, specifically in regard to recreational use?

For the New Testament church, Romans chapter 13 serves as the primary discourse concerning government. In that section the Apostle Paul plainly states that Christians obey the government because in doing so they are obeying God who gave them the government. The command is clear, “Everyone must submit (ὑποτασσέσθω) himself to the governing authorities” (v. 1). Paul’s reasoning is also very clear. γὰρ explains why everyone must submit: “For there is no authority except that which God has established” (v. 1). With those words, Paul includes every form of government, even the present American system. Yet, outside of divine revelation, there is no way Paul could have possibly envisioned the kind of interconnected government Americans enjoy today. Paul could not have imagined American democracy with all its checks and balances, levels of federal and local governments, and battles for individual and states’ rights. So which authority is the American Christian more obligated to obey – federal or state? When the state law says one thing, the federal law another, and federal enforcement still another, to what are American Christians supposed to submit and how are they supposed to act?

Paul plainly states in verse 2 that Christians are not supposed to rebel against God-given government because “he who rebels (ὁ ἀντιτασσόμενος) against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted.” Note that the present participle<sup>114</sup> has the exact same root as the commanding verb in verse 1 (ὑποτασσέσθω). Only the prepositions at the front of each verb differ. In fact, those prepositions (ὑπο and ἀντι) are complete opposites. God wants Christians to

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<sup>114</sup> It functions as an attributive – substantival participle and the subject of the sentence.

peacefully put themselves under (ὑπο) the government as his representatives, not to stand against it or in opposition to it (ἀντι). BDAG defines ἀντιτάσσω as “oppose, resist.” The key question in the discussion of marijuana, then, is this: “When people smoke recreational marijuana in states that have legalized it, do they resist or rebel against the federal government? Are they purposefully setting themselves against the federal government?”

I maintain that they are not. Keep in mind that Paul’s directives, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are as broad as possible. Paul does not give specifics of which type of government is best or how specific governments are to carry out their functions as God’s representatives. He simply commands Christians to obey the government that is there as it governs. It is up to each government to conduct itself on its own as it makes, interprets, and enforces laws. The American federal government made a law forbidding marijuana. Since then, some states have employed their own voting laws to legalize it. For instance, Amendment 64 changed Colorado’s law to read, “The people of the state of Colorado find and declare that the use of marijuana should be legal for persons twenty-one years of age or older.”<sup>115</sup> The federal government needed to respond, and the U.S. Department of Justice chose to do so through the Office of the Attorney General on August 29, 2013.

The Office of the Attorney General released a memo entitled “Guidance Regarding Marijuana Enforcement.” This guiding memo listed eight “enforcement priorities that are particularly important to the federal government.”<sup>116</sup> Most of those eight points do not have recreational use in mind as it is most commonly done. The two priorities that come closest are “preventing the distribution of marijuana to minors” and “preventing marijuana possession or use on federal property.”<sup>117</sup> The memo guides federal enforcement *not* to pursue the most common private and personal uses because it is not worth the time, effort, or resources. The memo states its position in this way, “Outside of these enforcement priorities, the federal government has traditionally relied on states and local law enforcement agencies to address activity through

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<sup>115</sup> Colorado Constitution, art. 18, sec. 16, cl. 1.a. The full text of Colorado’s Amendment 64 can be found at <http://www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite?blobcol=urldata&blobheader=application/pdf&blobkey=id&blobtable=MungoBlobs&blobwhere=1251834064719&ssbinary=true>.

<sup>116</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Deputy Attorney General, *Guidance Regarding Marijuana Enforcement*, by James M. Cole, Deputy Attorney General (Washington, D.C., August 29, 2013), 1, <http://www.justice.gov/iso/opa/resources/3052013829132756857467.pdf> (accessed September 28, 2014).

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 2. This last priority is why Denver International Airport bans all possession and display of marijuana at its airport, since it is so likely to enter federal air space and cross state lines. Also, because many of Colorado’s ski resorts are on federal forest land, they emphasize that marijuana use will be enforced by their ski patrol.

enforcement of *their own* narcotics laws.”<sup>118</sup> Basically, in states where it is legal, the federal government does not consider those using recreational marijuana as people who are resisting, opposing, or setting themselves against the federal government. Therefore, I do not believe that Christians are purposefully rebelling against the government if they smoke recreational marijuana in states where it is legal according to state law.

That is not to say, however, that this is the only 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment issue to be considered. According to Romans chapter 13, the government has two main purposes: to punish the wrongdoer (v. 3) and to reward those who do good (v. 4). While it may be unlikely that the federal government would prosecute Christians who use recreational marijuana in legal states, prosecution still remains a possibility. The same August 2013 memo, in its closing paragraph, makes sure to emphasize that “neither the guidance herein nor any state or local law provides a legal defense to a violation of federal law, including any civil or criminal violation of the CSA... This memorandum is not intended to, does not, and may not be relied upon to create any rights.”<sup>119</sup> Therefore, the federal government has still reserved its God-given right to “bear the sword” and “to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (v. 4).

It also reserves its right to reward those who do good, although in an indirect sort of way. The federal government does not award medals or monetary incentives to those who do not use recreational marijuana, but it does allow citizens to keep their job and permits employers to fire employees who test positive for marijuana. Colorado’s law makes it clear, “Nothing in this section is intended to require an employer to permit or accommodate the use, consumption, possession, transfer, display, transportation, sale or growing of marijuana in the workplace or to affect the ability of employers to have policies restricting the use of marijuana by employees.”<sup>120</sup> A case dealing with a very similar issue is making its way up to the Colorado Supreme Court. The case involves a man whom Dish Network fired after testing positive for marijuana in 2010. The man, a quadriplegic, maintains that he only used legal medicinal marijuana off-the-clock, but a Colorado Court of Appeals upheld Dish Network’s firing, citing the plain letter of the

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<sup>118</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Deputy Attorney General, *Guidance Regarding Marijuana Enforcement*, 2. Emphasis mine.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. The CSA is the abbreviation for the Controlled Substances Act which made marijuana federally illegal.

<sup>120</sup> Colorado Constitution, art. 18, sec. 16, cl. 6.a.

law.<sup>121</sup> The case has some nuances because it was medicinal use, but it shows that courts have been eager to allow employers to reward those who do good and stay away from a federally illegal drug.

In summary of Romans chapter 13, what should be said? While the federal government may not view recreational users as rebels, and while American Christians may not fear federal prosecution, they certainly may fear losing their job and receiving no sympathy from their employer or the court system. That could weigh very heavily on people's consciences as they use recreational marijuana, and Paul writes that obeying the government is not just a matter of "possible punishment" but also one "of conscience" (v. 5). Could Christians' consciences let them use marijuana knowing their jobs could be taken away from them and, thus, their means of providing for family and self? Medicinal use might be worth that risk if it helps Christians with serious sickness, but recreational marijuana does not seem worth it. It seems that a Christian conscience could not allow for the possibility of losing a job just to pursue a fleeting pleasure.

Peter reinforces Paul's points in 1 Peter 2:13-17. Peter's section has many similarities to Paul's, right down to the opening command, "Submit" (v. 13). Peter even uses ὑποτάγητε, a form of the same root word (ὑποτάσσω) Paul used in Romans 13:1. Pastors ought to look at one particular point Peter makes that Paul did not. The Holy Spirit caused Peter to write, "Do not use your freedom as a cover-up (ἐπικάλυμμα)<sup>122</sup> for evil" (v. 16). Later on, when the paper discusses sanctification, it will examine further whether or not marijuana is evil or immoral, but either way Peter still has a warning for Christians.

Christians do not participate in something simply because they are free to do so, especially when that freedom rests on shaky political ground. Remember, the Justice Department's memo does not change law; it is the policy of those working right now in the Office of the Attorney General. Some have noted, "That's a shaky foundation to build confidence in a state's legalization plan. More importantly, it applies only to this moment in this presidential administration. President Obama's Justice Department could change its policy at any

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<sup>121</sup> *The Denver Post* Editorial Board, "No Absolute Right to Use Medical Marijuana," *The Denver Post*, October 5, 2014, [http://www.denverpost.com/marijuana/ci\\_26659042/no-absolute-right-use-medical-marijuana](http://www.denverpost.com/marijuana/ci_26659042/no-absolute-right-use-medical-marijuana) (accessed November 23, 2014).

<sup>122</sup> Thus BDAG: "a stratagem for concealing something, *cover, veil*."



time, and so of course could the next administration.”<sup>123</sup> In fact, President Obama’s choice for the next attorney general, Loretta Lynch, does not support legalization of marijuana. During a confirmation hearing she stated, “I do not support legalization of marijuana – it is not the position of the Department of Justice currently, to support the legalization, nor would it be the position should I become confirmed as attorney general.”<sup>124</sup> When Christians look at the fluid political situation (especially in light of the recent midterm elections) and Peter’s warning about using certain amounts of freedom just for a personal lifestyle, recreational use becomes a hard sell. It may be legal or – at least – unenforced, but for how long?

“It’s illegal” is no longer an easy fallback answer for WELS pastors concerning recreational marijuana. Then again, neither is, “It’s legal.” Within the realm of God’s 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment, the recreational marijuana issue has so many underlying factors – not the least of which is a federal enforcement policy that could change at any moment. In the big picture, using recreational marijuana, although not outright rebellion against the government, probably is not the best political statement Lutheran Christians want to make, nor is it the best use of freedom.

#### 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment

“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). Every single human has manifold reasons to praise God for his gifts of body and life, and the endocannabinoid system has to be included among them. Christians recognize body and life as godly gifts which are to be promoted and protected. Does recreational marijuana use do the opposite? I believe there is truth and something to be said that marijuana does in fact appear to be less harmful than alcohol use, including that it seems to be less addictive.<sup>125</sup>

On the other hand, other scientific studies show that cannabis works differently than alcohol. Since alcohol is water soluble, the body can quickly get rid of it. THC acts differently; it is not water soluble. Instead, this chemical compound latches onto cell receptors and needs to be

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<sup>123</sup> David Firestone, “Let States Decide on Marijuana.”

<sup>124</sup> Bill Chappell, “AG Nominee Lynch Says She Differs from Obama on Marijuana,” National Public Radio, January 28, 2015, [http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2015/01/28/382235633/ag-nominee-lynch-says-she-differs-from-obama-on-marijuana?utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_campaign=npr&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_term=nprnews](http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2015/01/28/382235633/ag-nominee-lynch-says-she-differs-from-obama-on-marijuana?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=npr&utm_medium=social&utm_term=nprnews) (accessed January 28, 2015).

<sup>125</sup> Ryan Vandrey, Ph.D, and Margaret Haney, Ph.D. “How Real Is the Risk of Addiction?,” 188.

cleaned out by body-produced enzymes. This process can take up to a month and is elongated every time THC is administered because another layer is added to the receptors. The more layers there are, the more cognitive function is adversely affected. Professor John Schuetze uses these facts to prove that “marijuana for recreational use is quite different than the moderate use of alcohol.”<sup>126</sup> Cognitive performance increases after quitting, especially if the use had been frequent. Roger Roffman personally noted “improvement in [his] memory and concentration.”<sup>127</sup> But even after quitting, there is evidence indicating that a person does not recover all of the previous mental capacity.<sup>128</sup>

Scientists do not have as firm a grasp on marijuana and how it works when compared to alcohol or tobacco, but it does have enough evidence to raise some serious questions. Marijuana affects cognitive performance and mental capacity. It decreases blood flow to the brain.<sup>129</sup> It also has a risk of addiction. Some people dance around the word addiction and claim that some frequent marijuana users can exhibit *dependence*, a technical medical term that – in my opinion – has a softer and less severe connotation than *addiction* does to the average person. Roffman used the word dependence in his book but also strongly warned, “Some people, and this is not just a myth, really get into trouble with compulsive use of marijuana.”<sup>130</sup> Dr. Hopfer picked up on that point as well, but he did use the word addiction. He explained, “It’s a very insidious addiction... Its effects are subtle, gradual, and less dramatic. And it’s been trivialized.”<sup>131</sup> While marijuana possibly may be less addictive and less harmful than alcohol or tobacco, it is certainly not completely *harmless*. Until science knows more about marijuana’s effects on God’s gifts of body and life, Christians probably should not use recreational marijuana in light of God’s 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment.

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<sup>126</sup> John Schuetze, “When the Brain Goes to Pot,” in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 112, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 66, 67.

<sup>127</sup> Roger Roffman, *Marijuana Nation*, 247.

<sup>128</sup> Electa Draper, “Pot: Hundreds of Names, One Key Ingredient and Far-Reaching Effects.”

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Roger Roffman, *Marijuana Nation*, 305, 306.

<sup>131</sup> Electa Draper, “Pot: Hundreds of Names, One Key Ingredient and Far-Reaching Effects.”

## Offense

Even if there would be a clear affirmative answer to both the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Commandments, Christians would still have to jump over the hurdle of marijuana's stigma. When asked for his perspective regarding this thesis topic, my childhood pastor remarked, "As an old guy, the *m* word is still loaded with baggage for me." I think that reflects sentiment throughout WELS, if not for all of America. Already in 1974 *The Christian Century* echoed that sentiment, "As part of a confused, emotional reaction [in the 1960s], marijuana became a symbol of rejection of traditional values and principles. Sexual promiscuity, lack of incentive toward work-related goals, preoccupation with self, and societal protest were all linked to its use."<sup>132</sup> Even the city of Denver has struggled with the stigma of marijuana, trying to balance the wishes of recreational users with non-users' sensitivity to seeing and smelling marijuana.

Christians have a deep, loving concern for the faith of other brothers and sisters in Christ. They do not want to do anything that raises questions or doubts in other Christians' hearts and consciences. That is precisely Paul's point in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. "We know (*οἴδαμεν*) that we all possess knowledge (*γινώσκω*). Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (v. 1). The situation in Corinth involved idol meat. Some knew the objective fact that God had declared all foods clean, which included idol meat. Some also had knowledge from personal experience that idol meat did no harm. Paul uses word play between forms of *οἶδα* and *γινώσκω* to make the point more compelling. The former emphasizes objective facts and head knowledge. The latter has the nuance of knowledge from personal experience.

There are parallels to be had with recreational marijuana. Christians can see and know the objective fact that some states have declared recreational marijuana to be legal. Some Christians may also claim from personal "knowledge" and experience that marijuana can be quite harmless. That personal knowledge and experience carries a lot of weight with millennials (among the strongest and most numerous supporters of recreational marijuana) because they hold to a postmodern philosophy founded on personal anecdotes. That kind of knowledge often puffs up the recreational user, and love plays only a minor role in the discussion. This, of course, goes against Paul's directives. Love for neighbor must dominate and build up (v. 1). Christians must

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<sup>132</sup> Thomas E. Price and Ruth Hargraves, "Decriminalization of Marijuana: Dealing with the Reality, Not the Symbol," *Christian Century* 91, no. 30 (S 4-11 1974): 822, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=9eead3b7-6682-4ff6-912e-b5d080ec1cd6%40sessionmgr4004&vid=7&hid=4101> (accessed August 25, 2014).

set aside knowledge – whether objective or experiential – when it gets in the way of the Christian community and another’s faith.

Christians must look at recreational marijuana within the context of conscience, both theirs and others’. In 1 Corinthians chapter 8 Paul is intensely concerned for his neighbor’s “weak conscience” (v. 10) regarding idol meat, so much so that he would not eat any sort of meat for the rest of his life if it helped another’s conscience and faith. The word Paul uses for conscience is *συνείδησις*, and within Paul’s letters the word points to a Christ-centered ability “to see more sharply the conflicts of inwardly divided man.”<sup>133</sup> Empowered by Christ’s gospel and love, Christians not only look to quiet their own consciences but also the potentially divided consciences of others. Unlike the rest of society, Christians are acutely aware of and concerned for other Christians’ consciences. Love for God and for neighbor motivates them not to wound another’s faith with careless action.

A day may come when marijuana has shed its negative stereotypes, but it definitely has not come yet. Just as the Corinthians struggled with idol meat within their Christian community, recreational marijuana use potentially could divide congregations. Too many consciences could have trouble getting over the stigmas and stumbling blocks that recreational marijuana use puts in their way. While recreational use can be kept very private behind the closed doors of a home, it is worth asking, “How would my brothers and sisters in Christ react if they were right next to me as I smoke this marijuana? How would they react if they knew I use marijuana?” Someone may very well be walking in step with state law and within one’s own conscience, but if personal conduct seems to be advocating something which other consciences are not comfortable with, brothers and sisters in Christ stumble in their faith. Clearly that would not be a case of “love [building] up” (v. 2).

### Sanctification

Ultimately, using recreational marijuana comes down to sanctification. Can Christians use it in a way that pleases God and does not hinder them from doing gospel-motivated good works? As children of God bought by Christ’s perfect sacrifice, Christians want to show their love and thanks. Good works are fundamental in that thankful living, and pastors do their faithful

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<sup>133</sup> TDNT

best to encourage those kinds of works. Both 1 Timothy 4:1-5 and Galatians 5:16-21 give key principles to help pastors guide discussions about recreational marijuana use among Christians.

When the topic of marijuana has come up in conversation with my Christian friends, they sometimes make this appeal, “Isn’t there a passage in the Bible that says something about all of God’s creation being good? Wouldn’t that include marijuana too?” They are reaching back into their Christian education and recalling a paraphrase of 1 Timothy 4:1-5, specifically verse 4. The passage indeed says that very thing: “For everything God created is good.” On the surface, it sounds like a solid argument for recreational marijuana use. Marijuana is part of God’s creation. Paul says all of God’s creation is good. Therefore, marijuana must be good and acceptable to use.

On closer examination, a threefold response easily comes to the forefront, and pastors will want to note those three points. First of all, the immediate context of 1 Timothy chapter 4 deals with marriage and food as being prohibited by “deceiving spirits and things taught by demons” (v. 1). In his word God clearly blesses both marriage and food. The former he blessed already in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. Ephesians chapter 5 uses marriage as a symbol of Christ’s love for the Church. Jesus himself blessed marriage by appearing at the one in Cana and appealing to God’s words in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 (Matthew 19:4,5). God also removed prohibitory labels from “certain food” (1 Timothy 4:3) when he told Peter, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (Acts 10:15). Paul upheld that principle in 1 Corinthians chapter 8 when he said that Christians can eat all kinds of food. What about marijuana? Nowhere in Scripture does God give a clear blessing of marijuana and its use as he repeatedly has for marriage and food, and the immediate context of 1 Timothy chapter 4 limits the discussion to those two items.

God certainly created cannabis during the six days of creation. Therefore, pastors can assume that God declared it to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31), i.e. absolutely perfect, along with every other part of creation. Sin, however, has corrupted all of creation, both humans and even the ground that springs up plants (Genesis 3:17). If it is to be assumed that marijuana was part of creation from the beginning, then it is to be assumed that sin has corrupted marijuana in some way as well. Sinful humans certainly can find ways to abuse an imperfect plant in an imperfect world.

Finally, when Christians refer to 1 Timothy 4:4a, they often forget what comes immediately after it: “And nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer” (vv. 4b,5). God commands that his created world be used and received with thankful hearts and that it be “consecrated” (v. 4). The word Paul uses is *ἀγιάζεται*, which, in its literal sense, means “to be made holy.”<sup>134</sup> Christians then would consecrate marijuana with prayer (*ἐντεύξεως*), but most recreational use comes nowhere close to doing so. It is clear from the context of 1 Timothy 4:1-5 that Paul mostly has in mind marriage and food, not a substance like marijuana or even alcohol. That section does not give its blessing to marijuana use or how to use it in a sanctified way. The bottom line is that most people do not seem to use recreational marijuana in a sanctified, prayerful manner that sets it apart as a way to thankfully give glory to God.<sup>135</sup>

In Galatians 5:16-26 Paul writes an even more poignant section on sanctified living in response to the unconditional gospel. Paul’s plea to Christians is, “Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (v. 16). In the following verses he lists what the evil works of the sinful nature look like and contrasts those with the good works that the Spirit produces in Christians. When Christians (and especially pastors) examine these verses, they see principles that guide the topic of recreational marijuana.

The list of the works of flesh (*τὰ ἔργα τῆς σαρκός*) starting at Galatians 5:19 has no direct reference to marijuana use. Is marijuana use, therefore, declared acceptable by silence? Paul enumerates familiar sins like sexual immorality, debauchery, hatred, selfish ambition, and drunkenness, but he does not specifically mention marijuana. Closer examination of the Greek words used in the list, however, show hints of recreational drug use. *φαρμακεία* is among those words listed as “works of the flesh” (v. 20). From this word modern English has derived its word *pharmacy* (and other derivatives). *φαρμακεία* did not always enjoy the positive connotation it has in the English language. It originally meant simply to administer drugs in an innocent way, but over the course of time it became associated more and more with witchcraft, sorcery, and superstition. “It is, for instance, repeatedly used [in the Septuagint] of the Egyptian sorcerers and charmers who competed with Moses when Pharaoh would not let Israel go (Exodus 7:11, 8:18);

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<sup>134</sup> BDAG

<sup>135</sup> Pastors would also do well to remember that Paul is writing these verses in 1 Timothy to a young pastor. Paul is instructing Timothy in order that he may show and teach Christians how to live sanctified lives and use God’s creation in a sanctified way. Such is still the goal of pastors today.

and this magic and witchcraft and sorcery is one of the sins for which Isaiah foretells the destruction of Babylon by the wrath of God.”<sup>136</sup> In fact, *φαρμακεία* even seems to have a sort of voodoo feel to it, whereby magic was practiced along with mixes laced with drugs in order to harm people.<sup>137</sup> It is no wonder, therefore, why Paul included *φαρμακεία* among sinful works of the flesh.

Is that how people use recreational marijuana today, though? I am unaware of a situation where marijuana was used in a potion or mixture in order to harm someone purposefully. Yet parallels can be found between the practice of ancient Greek *φαρμακεία* and recreational marijuana use today. Timothy George noted that while “witchcraft” and “sorcery” are acceptable translations for *φαρμακεία*, they “miss the more basic meaning of drug use. In New Testament times *φαρμακεία* in fact denoted the use of drugs with occult properties for a variety of purposes.”<sup>138</sup> Commenting on the Greek word *φαρμακεία*, Professor Richard Balge wrote,

Something should be said about seeking God or God’s will or God’s truth in revelations, visions, or experiences or through means other than his word... The point to be noted here is that the practice of superstition frequently did involve... the use of drugs. We are told, for example, that the tripod of the Oracle at Delphi was actually placed over a cleft in the rock from which issued a natural gas (nitrous oxide?), which induced the state of trance in which the oracle uttered her ambiguous pronouncements.<sup>139</sup>

Now recall how the Scythians used marijuana in their heathen rituals of the dead. They smoked marijuana in order to get high and honor the dead in that altered state. They were using it not for medicinal purposes but as a way to pursue practices of false religions. Anthropologists might call that something like “ritual religious marijuana use” as opposed to recreational, but compare that with the theme of self-exploration in modern recreational marijuana use:

Acutely altered does not necessarily mean chronically impaired. There are times when an altered state is useful, when drug experiences can be life-affirming or life-changing. Some drugs help provide a glimpse of the “macro,” a larger map of where things stand where one is heading. Good ideas can come from “stepping outside the box” and seeing

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<sup>136</sup> William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 36, 37.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>138</sup> Timothy George, *The New American Commentary, Volume 30: Galatians* (Nashville: Broadman & Homan Publishers, 1994), 394.

<sup>139</sup> Richard D. Balge, “Spiritual Implications of Drug Abuse and Its Treatment,” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 5, <http://www.wlsessays.net/node/59> (accessed October 4, 2014).

the bigger picture. Psychospiritual exploration, soul-searching, communing with the self—these are normal and important components of the human experience.<sup>140</sup>

Just as the Scythians sought a marijuana-induced altered state that led them further away from God's comfort, in the same way, much of recreational marijuana today leads people away from God through altered states. There is a common underlying theme from the Scythians to the Oracle at Delphi to modern marijuana use. People often use marijuana to affirm life apart from the true God.

The classic example is Rastafarianism, a religious practice that attempts to use marijuana as a key instrument to get in touch with God. Rastafarianism employs language that sounds Trinitarian, but it clearly is not. Nor does Rastafarianism center itself in Christ's sacrificial work. Still, one does not need to practice Rastafarianism in order to use marijuana as false worship. For recreational users, marijuana often becomes an avenue of self-exploration and elevates the potential found within self. Such motivation is a far cry from conducting oneself by the Spirit (*πνεύματι περιπατεῖτε*, as found in Galatians 5:16). Living by the Holy Spirit does not mean getting in touch with one's own totally depraved inner spirit. Using marijuana as a way to get in touch with and listen to self is nothing short of self-idolatry. It sets one's self above God. It would listen to an inner spirit rather than the words of a loving God. Many users probably would not see their pattern of use in such spiritual terms, but dissect what they say more closely, and it is really what they do. Marijuana becomes "a way to relax" after work. Pry a little bit more, and it is evident that marijuana is not really just one way of many to relax, it is often their main way. It becomes their form of *meditatio* and supplants the word of God through which the Holy Spirit brings spiritual rest and empowers sanctified living.

What is more, Paul calls the works of the flesh "obvious" (*φανερά*) in Galatians 5:19; they are not hard to spot. Run down the list of words in verses 19-21, and you do not have to think hard of examples for each of those words. At the end of it all, Paul broadens the list and declares that those who keep on doing the same sorts of things (*οἱ τὰ τοιαῦτα πράσσοντες*) will not receive heaven. Most modern recreational marijuana use qualifies as *τὰ τοιαῦτα* – being similar to drunkenness or debauchery or idolatry. It seems to me that most recreational use

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<sup>140</sup> Julie Holland, M.D., "Introduction to Part Four," in *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide to Cannabis: Its Role in Medicine, Politics, Science, and Culture*, ed. Julie Holland (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2010), 344.



infrequently is “moderate,” and too often those who smoke recreational marijuana become obviously high and intoxicated.

People use marijuana with the motivation to fulfill desires imbedded within the sinful flesh, and while marijuana may not chemically be a “gateway drug,” I am convinced that in America right now it is a gateway drug *culturally*. Hang around those who have recreational marijuana as part of their lifestyle and you will find culture and company that frequently corrupt good Christian character in one way or another. The bottom line is that recreational marijuana use often impedes living which is sanctified and in step with the Spirit.

Can Christians use recreational marijuana in good conscience? When Christians and pastors examine the way marijuana has been used in the past and continues to be used today, the answer to the question is this: probably not. Christians probably cannot use recreational marijuana in good conscience. The Bible does not explicitly call it sin, and so we must be careful not to say too much. Examine the political, societal, and scriptural implications, however, and recreational use does not look like a good way to live a thankful, sanctified Christian lifestyle.

## **Conclusion**

“Can Christians use marijuana in good conscience?” The question has become increasingly complicated, especially over the last few years. In order to answer the question, pastors must sift through new scientific studies, state laws, and guidance for federal enforcement. This thesis attempted to do so in an effort to get at the spiritual heart of medicinal and recreational use. Obviously pastors are most concerned about the spiritual issues. Pastors do not ignore the politics or science behind marijuana use, but they think most about providing spiritual care to souls who are on their way to heaven. Pastors ask, “How does medicinal and recreational marijuana use impact the sanctified living of souls belonging to Jesus?”

Regarding medicinal marijuana, the thesis has shown that God cares for the healing and health of his creatures. It has also shown that legitimate medical uses for marijuana do exist, especially for chemotherapy, ALS, and MS. Therefore, Christians can use medicinal marijuana in good conscience, even if the scope is narrow. Christians must not use medicinal marijuana in states where it is illegal and outside of a doctor’s recommendation and prescription. Christians must also be convinced that there are no other safer, more legal options to treat symptoms or disease. If Christians wrestle with these issues through God’s word and prayer and still have

clear consciences (about the stigma, the political risks, and the potential side effects), then let them use it with thanksgiving and prayer, hoping that God speeds the day when marijuana's use is no longer needed for their health.

How do pastors get this message across to their members in states where medicinal marijuana is legal? The pulpit is most certainly *not* the place to start. Culture – especially WELS congregational culture – is not ready for that. Even medicinal marijuana carries too much stigma to be preached from the pulpit. Pastors need to do much education before that happens. Bible class seems a more natural setting. A pastor in Colorado recalled how he led his congregation through a Bible class on marijuana shortly before Amendment 64 became effective; he noted that it seemed to go quite well. Bible class provides an opportunity – centered in Christ and his word – for Christians to have a discussion with the pastor and ask questions of him. The pastor can also learn more about the perspectives and thoughts his members bring to the table, which will aid him in personal counseling situations. Ultimately, pastors will take great pains to make it exceptionally clear that although there may be a window for appropriate, God-pleasing medicinal marijuana use, the window is narrow. Recognizing each instance should be taken on a case-by-case basis, pastors will also stress the open invitation to discuss the topic one-on-one with him. Members should feel comfortable knowing they can have an honest, safe, and loving conversation with their pastor if their doctor recommends medicinal marijuana use. Within that intimate setting, pastors can most clearly help members explore personal motivation and teach what God says through his word.

What about recreational use? Can Christians use marijuana recreationally in good conscience? Since the Bible does not specifically label recreational marijuana use as sin, it is an adiaphoron. Therefore, before saying too much, perhaps it is best to answer the question with a question, or rather, a series of questions. Is recreational marijuana use opposing God's representatives in government? Is legal prosecution a fear? Does recreational use selfishly risk losing a job and thus means to provide for family and self? How will this affect God-given gifts of body and talents? Is there such a thing as moderate use? Is addiction a real risk? Will this use offend others, especially other Christians? Is such use sanctified with prayer or does it resemble other sins that God hates? When people use marijuana, are they worshipping self or are they truly doing it to the glory of God?

Those are just some of the many questions Christians must ask themselves in regard to recreational marijuana use. The issue is not like a one hurdle race, whereby a Christian just needs to clear one lonely hurdle and then sprint to the end saying, “If I just do it legally at the state level, I’m in the clear.” Each of the previous questions is its own hurdle. Before crossing the finish line to a clear conscience before God, Christians must clear every single one of those hurdles without stumbling, veering out of the lane, or falling down. Can Christians use recreational marijuana, then, in good conscience? While we should not call something a sin that the Bible does not call sin, Christians (and especially pastors) must recognize the serious and numerous spiritual implications and risks involved. It seems like a very tall task to clear all those spiritual hurdles in order to justify recreational use in good conscience.

How, then, do pastors deal with recreational marijuana at the congregational level? Again, the pulpit does not seem the best place to begin. The issue needs education, and Bible class presents the best opportunity for that. It affords the pastor chances to speak thoroughly, carefully, honestly, and lovingly as he reflects the care and concern the Good Shepherd showed in his ministry. Hopefully such Bible classes also will enable members to speak confidently from Scripture to friends and family members who use marijuana. Ideally, Bible class would begin to prick the consciences of those who may be struggling with recreational use at home. Pastors are not private investigators or members of an inquisition; they do not seek to catch their members getting high. The message they do want to get across, however, is that marijuana use is dangerous, if not a sin. Pastors will stress that their office is always a place to which members can confidently go to hear honest biblical counsel and – if needed – loving forgiveness from the pastor and from God. After all, God has placed pastors in their congregations to care for their members’ souls.<sup>141</sup>

This paper is far from comprehensive. It intends to give an overview of the medicinal and recreational issues by plowing through some of the most important scientific facts and most pertinent cultural points. Pastors and seminarians could still explore a wide range of topics such as counseling habitual users, a scriptural comparison of current marijuana laws with alcohol prohibition in United States history, a more in-depth look at the pastoral issues in a particular

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<sup>141</sup> I think we need to be especially cautious with not overreacting to someone who admits marijuana use. I am convinced that in heaven we will see Christians who have used, are using, and/or will use marijuana. Pastors must neither ostracize them nor make light of their actions. As with everything, it comes down to christocentric law and gospel ministry, as applied to individuals.

state, how the marijuana debate could spark a fresh look at alcohol and tobacco use, and a closer examination of marijuana as a 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment issue (i.e., using highs to elevate oneself both with and without Rastafarianism).

What I do hope this paper has made especially clear is that pastors should honestly wrestle with marijuana issues from a scriptural basis. Too much is happening politically, culturally, and scientifically. It would be foolish for pastors to hide behind stock answers that contented people twenty years ago. Members and prospects will appreciate a pastor who has shown enough love and concern to faithfully tackle a political and spiritual hot button issue. Most importantly, it is the pastor's God-given privilege and duty to do so. They are entrusted with the task of caring for people's souls and helping show Christ to them, even in the question of using marijuana. Can Christians use marijuana in good conscience? As pastors wrestle with that question and then educate their members, they always remind themselves and others that they are fearfully and wonderfully made creatures who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ's blood. In loving response, they look for all the ways in which they can "thank and praise, serve and obey"<sup>142</sup> God, and that includes their approach to and use of marijuana.

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<sup>142</sup> Luther's explanation to the First Article as found in the David Kuske version.

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## **Appendix A**

### *Terms and Definitions*

#### **Cannabidiol**

A non psychoactive chemical compound in cannabis known for its therapeutic effects.

#### **Cannabinoid**

A chemical compound (such as cannabidiol and tetrahydrocannabinol) that attaches itself to cannabinoid receptors within the body's endocannabinoid system, affecting neurotransmission.

#### **Cannabis**

Specifically, a flowering plant genus that has been used throughout history for a variety of purposes, including food, fiber, fuel, medicine, and shelter. This word is often used synonymously with *marijuana*.

#### **Decriminalized**

A law enforcement policy adopted in some states and cities that greatly reduces the penalty for possession of small amounts of marijuana to something like a minor traffic violation.

#### **Edibles**

Any sort of food or candy that is prepared with marijuana, whether for medicinal or recreational purposes.

#### **Endocannabinoid**

A cannabinoid that the body naturally produces (unlike THC).

#### **Hemp**

Generally referring to the fiber taken from cannabis plants and used for fabric.

#### **High**

The state of pleasure which marijuana can produce.

#### **Hit**

Slang term for one quick inhalation of marijuana smoke.

#### **Joint**

Slang term for a marijuana cigarette, generally containing about half a gram of marijuana.

#### **Medicinal marijuana**

Marijuana that is used for medical purposes because of its therapeutic properties.

#### **Marijuana**

A mixture made up of the dried leaves and flowers of a cannabis plant. While just the parts of a cannabis plant, *marijuana* and *cannabis* are often used as synonyms.

Pot

A slang term, seemingly of Mexican origins, that refers to a marijuana mixture.

Recreational marijuana

Marijuana that is used for any non medicinal purpose in order to achieve a state of pleasure (i.e., a high).

Reefer

Like *pot*, a slang term synonymous with marijuana (and sometimes with joints).

Strain

A variety of cannabis, whether pure or a hybrid, developed to produce a particular effect based on its cannabinoid content.

Stoned

To be high.

Stoner

Anyone who is known for recreational use and exhibits the negative stereotypical signs of frequent use.

Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC)

A cannabinoid found in marijuana that serves as the main psychoactive agent which produces a high.

Vaporize

A method of consuming marijuana whereby the mixture is heated without fire, producing a vapor that is inhaled. *Vape* is a slang derivative.

The Cannabist has compiled a much more exhaustive list of terms, both technical and slang, which can be found at:

<http://www.thecannabist.co/2014/06/13/marijuana-terms-and-definitions-cannabis-lexicon-glossary-pot-terminology/13174/>

## Appendix B

### *Resources for Pastors and Parents*

This is a list of web sites that may help parents and pastors learn more about marijuana and discover ways of talking about marijuana to other adults, young adults, and children.

Speak Now Colorado – [www.http://speaknowcolorado.org](http://speaknowcolorado.org)

- *A site developed by the Colorado Department of Human Services that is “focused on providing evidence-based information and resources to parents and caregiver regarding youth substance abuse prevention.”*

Consume Responsibly – <http://www.consumerresponsibly.org/>

- *A site run by the Marijuana Policy Project aimed at marijuana education.*

National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) – [www.norml.org](http://www.norml.org)

- *The website of arguably the most active pro-marijuana group in America.*

The Cannabist – <http://www.thecannabist.co/>

- *A subdivision of The Denver Post, The Cannabist talks about “the culture of cannabis” and calls itself “a place of ideas, people, art, food, and news.”*

## **Appendix C**

### *Timeline of Cannabis in American History*

- 1906            The American government issues the Pure Food and Drug Act, a consumer protection law that required food and drug products (including cannabis) to have labels of contents.
- 1937            The Marijuana Tax Act is passed, effectively making marijuana an illegal substance throughout the United States.
- 1941            Marijuana is removed from the U.S. Pharmacopeia and National Formulary.
- 1970            Congress passes the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act, also known as the Controlled Substances Act (CSA). The CSA labeled marijuana as “Schedule 1,” meaning that the government recognized no known medicinal benefit and a high potential for abuse. This law still is in effect.
- 1978            New Mexico is the first state to legalize medicinal marijuana.
- 2012            Colorado and Washington vote to legalize small amounts of marijuana for recreational use.
- 2014            Alaska, Oregon, and the District of Columbia vote to legalize recreational marijuana.

## Appendix D

*States with Legal Medicinal Use, Legal Recreational Use, and/or Decriminalized Marijuana*

<b>State</b>	<b>Medicinal Use</b>	<b>Recreational Use</b>	<b>Decriminalized</b>
Alaska	✓	✓	✓
Arizona	✓		
California	✓		✓
Colorado	✓	✓	✓
Connecticut	✓		✓
<i>District of Columbia</i>	✓	✓	✓
Delaware	✓		
Hawaii	✓		
Illinois	✓		
Maine	✓		✓
Maryland	✓		✓
Massachusetts	✓		✓
Michigan	✓		
Minnesota	✓		✓
Montana	✓		
Mississippi			✓
Nebraska			✓
Nevada	✓		✓
New Hampshire	✓		
New Jersey	✓		
New Mexico	✓		
New York	✓		✓
North Carolina			✓
Ohio			✓
Oregon	✓		✓
Rhode Island	✓		✓
Vermont	✓		✓
Washington	✓	✓	