

5th. Introduction, Focus, WCF, Authority, and Submission

Introduction

Our approach to the 5th is shaped by the theme of the ETS paper I will present in March in St. Paul. That theme is “Mutual Submission in Marriage Within the Structure of the Husband’s Headship.” How does this theme fit under the heading of the 5th commandment? In a word, it fits here because the 5th treats the general subject of submission to authority in terms of the particular subject of submission of children to parental authority. In other words, by good and necessary consequence study of the Ten Words indicates that each commandment is comparable to a grape on a cluster of grapes. The single grape is a central representative of what is on the entire cluster. For example, from Jesus, we know that “do not kill” (the 6th) is a case in point of the sanctity of life (the positive command to promote your own life and the life of others). Sinful anger is another grape on this “life” cluster: anger destroys life and checking our anger and that of others preserves life. From Jesus, we learn how to find the spirit and intent of all Ten Words. By analogy, we can look for the core principle (like the sanctity of life) and from that core discern particular duties (both positive and negative) that advance the spirit of each command.

Accordingly, the 5th deals with the fundamental principle of authority. It thus represents all authority structures on earth and through them the authority of God. His authority stands behind every form of human authority (Q: how might we underline the importance and applicability of this point?).

This is what we have in the WLC. As we cite the catechism, we should note that the implications of this principle in its true spirit and intent include not only positive and negative angles but also each side of the equation in the relationship of human authority structures: that is, we are to draw out positive and negative inferences for both those “in” authority and for those “under” authority; for both “superiors” and “inferiors” in role and position, not inherently (how might we state better this point of “not inherently”?).

Note Qs 124 & 126 in the WLC:

124 Who are meant by father and mother in the fifth commandment? A. By father and mother, in the fifth commandment, are meant, not only natural parents, but all superiors in age, and gifts; and *especially such as, by God's ordinance, are over us in place of authority*, whether in family, church, or commonwealth. 126 What is the general scope of the fifth commandment? A. The general scope of the fifth commandment is, the performance of those duties which we mutually owe in our several relations, as inferiors, superiors, or equals.

Next, the catechism covers the honor that inferiors owe to their superiors (127) and how they may sin against them (128). Then it takes up the duties of superiors to their inferiors (129) and how superiors may sin against those under their authority (130). There is much for healthy meditation in Qs 124-130.

Our focus is on the husband as one in authority per the 5th. Of particular interest is the duty that is implicit and not cited in 129, namely, the duty that husband’s have to submit, at times, to their wives. It is “at times” because the general principle is that the husband is the leading authority figure in the home (the support for this point needs to be put on the table of discussion). Accordingly, our attention is on mutual submission *within* the husband’s headship.

A lead question for the ETS conference is: “what makes praxis evangelical?” *Praxis* is a big word that academicians use for practice in contrast to theory, and *evangelical* is an adjective from the Greek word for the gospel. Evangelical means “in keeping with the gospel.” Our question becomes, “what is required for *conduct that accords with the gospel*?” Conduct relates to duty before God and duty is defined by Scripture and is summarized in the Ten Commandments. Thus, the larger point concerns the relationship of law and gospel. In other words, how does law-guided conduct avoid legalism and harmonize with the gospel of grace?

We need a general answer to the praxis-law-gospel question as a picture frame in which to view the mutuality in marriage as a particular duty of the 5th commandment. The general answer is twofold. First, we might assert the three ingredients of a good act: the right standard, motive, and goal (how can we unpack each ingredient?). That is helpful, but what is problem here in relation to “evangelical”? So, second, we need to note straightforwardly that we must not pursue matters of conduct without a gospel orientation. How can we state and defend this “gospel orientation” that is the foundation for or the picture frame of mutuality in marriage?