

## Intersections, Distinctions, and Clarifications

By *Sam Renihan*, preached on 16 August 2020

### 1. Liberty of Conscience

- In *morality* – God’s law stands. No one can make sin to be holy, or holiness to be sinful.
- In *worship* – God’s law stands. No one can force us to worship God in a way that God has forbidden or not commanded.
- In *things indifferent* or *positive*, that is, things not right or wrong in and of themselves. These are usually matters of wisdom with various legitimate possibilities.
  - The conscience is free in such matters with regard to considering them to be inherently right or wrong. But the conscience is *not* free in such matters with regard to the authority that commands them.
  - We obey such commands not because the command itself is a matter of right or wrong, but because we are obligated to obey the one commanding.
- There is a difference between *binding the conscience*, and *binding actions*.
  - Consciences are bound by God’s law in morality and worship. This is different from commands that bind our actions. To say, “You must worship the one true God of the Bible” is to bind *consciences*. To say, “Your speed must not exceed 45 MPH” is to bind *actions*.

### 2. The Submission of Inferiors to Superiors

- Children to parents, wives to husbands, citizens to magistrates, church members to ministers (Exod. 20:12; Eph. 5:22-6:9; Rom. 13:1; Titus 3:1-2; Heb. 13:17)
- In all things moral
- In all things religious (in the case of ministerial authority)
- *And* in all things indifferent
  - A child may think that an 8:30PM bedtime is unnecessarily early, and may realize that it is not a moral matter, but must obey the parent’s command. Their conscience is free with regard to what bedtime is best. Their conscience is not free with regard to obeying the authority of their parents who have set the bedtime.
  - A citizen may think that certain taxes are burdensome, but he must pay them. A storeowner may think that liquor laws (restricting sales to certain days or places) are unnecessary, but he must obey them.
- When should an inferior disobey a superior?
  - When commanded to do something immoral.
  - When commanded to do something sacrilegious.
  - *Not* when you disagree with the prescription or proscription of something indifferent.

### 3. The Hierarchy of God’s Law

- In certain cases, obedience to one command from God may conflict with obedience to another command from God. The Scriptures reveal a general hierarchy.
- Matters pertaining to the protection and preservation of life take priority over the ordinary observance of ceremonial commands (Matt. 12:1-12)
  - Rescuing an animal fallen into a ditch is more important than ordinary Sabbath observance.
  - David’s men ate holy bread from the tabernacle. Preserving their lives was more important than observing the sacred nature of the bread set apart for the Levites.

#### 4. The Nature of Obedience to God's Law

- What God forbids is never to be done.
  - It is never lawful to have another god before God.
  - It is never lawful to make a graven image of God.
- What God commands is always our duty, and therefore we must always have an inward disposition of obedience.
- Not all duties are to be performed at all times. Consideration must be given to the hierarchy or relation of one command to another to decide what to do.<sup>1</sup>
  - I cannot rest from all my labors *and* rescue my donkey from a ditch. Do I sin by rescuing my donkey? No.
  - If I become sick, I cannot recover my health or protect my neighbor from illness *and* assemble with the saints at church. Do I sin by not attending? No.
  - I cannot assemble with the saints at church *and* attend my mom's birthday party. Do I sin by attending my mom's birthday party? Yes.

#### 5. The Worship of the Church

- ***Elements of Worship*** – Those things which God has commanded us to do *as acts of worship*, such as prayer, reading of Scripture, singing praises, preaching, administering sacraments.
  - The conscience is bound to perform these as acts of worship to God.
  - No authority can command us to perform other acts, *as worship*, or forbid us from performing these acts, *as worship*.
- ***Circumstances of Worship*** – The way in which we do what God has commanded us to do in worship, such as: How many services should we hold? What time should we meet? How long should a sermon be? How many hymns should we sing? Which hymns should we sing? How long should the Scripture reading be? Which portions of Scripture should we read? What color should the walls be? How should we arrange the seats? Should we close our eyes to pray?
  - These are matters of wisdom, and the conscience is not bound to a particular answer to these questions.
  - However, any decision related to them will bind actions, in most cases.
- **2LCF 1.6** “There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word.”

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<sup>1</sup> The “Rules for the Right Understanding of the Ten Commandments” in the Westminster Larger Catechism state, “What God forbids is at no time to be done, what he commands is always our duty, and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times.” Ezekiel Hopkins, in an *Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, wrote in 1692, “Every negative command binds always and at all times, but the affirmative commands, though they are always binding, yet they do not bind every moment. Indeed, as to the disposition of obedience they do, but not as to the acts. To make this plain by instance: The First Commandment, You shall have no other gods before me, binds always, and to every moment of time, so that whosoever shall at any time set up any other god to worship, besides the Lord Jehovah, is guilty of idolatry. But the positive command, which is included in the negative, namely, to worship, to love, to invoke, to depend upon God, always obliges us, for we must never act contrary to it; and likewise it obliges us at all times, in respect of the dispositions of divine love, faith, and worship, yet it does not oblige us to every moment in respect to the acts of these dispositions; for it is impossible to be always actually praying, actually praising, and actually worshiping God; neither is it required that we should do so, for this would make one duty shock and interfere with another.”

## 6. Congregationalism

- Ecclesiastical power is only exercised when the elders and members cooperatively act.
  - Admission of members, Ordination of officers, Prohibition of participation in Lord's Supper, Excommunication
  - Our Confession of Faith and Constitution are sources of common agreement that protect this congregationalism.
- Beyond Confessional and Constitutional matters there are other matters which can be, but do not have to be, determined with participation from the congregation. This is separate from congregationalism. These are matters not concerned with ecclesiastical power. This is purely a matter of the organization of a given church and its normal operating procedures.
- We do not have to agree on these matters, either as a church or as elders. Perfect unity on these matters is not necessary and is often counterproductive to pursue. The "wisdom from above" is "peaceable" and "open to reason" or "willing to yield" (James 3:17). Even so, someone must make decisions about certain things.
- Whether such matters are decided by the elders alone or with the congregation's participation, members ought to submit to the authority of the decision.
  - If the elders decided to add four more hymns to the AM worship service, then the congregation may think this to be unnecessary and potentially wearisome, but the church ought to submit to this decision. The decision does not bind consciences; it binds *actions*. It is not an addition of an element of worship, but an alteration of a circumstance.
  - If the elders, with the congregation, voted to change the PM service time from 5PM to 1:30PM, the members who disagree should submit to this decision. The decision does not bind consciences; it binds *actions*. The time of a service is not an element of worship, but a circumstance.
  - One does not have to agree with the judgment used to make a determination on such matters (i.e., non-Confessional and non-Constitutional matters), but one must submit to the determination. This gives us strength, unity without uniformity.

## 7. The Authority of the State

- The preservation of life and the promotion of the family (Gen. 9:1-7)
- "1 Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, 2 to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people" Titus 3:1-2.

## 8. Questions

- Can the civil magistrate bind *consciences*? No one can bind the conscience further than God's law has already bound it. No relation of authority and submission obligates one to obey a command that violates God's law. God is the ultimate Superior, to which all persons and relations are inferior. "We must obey God rather than man."
  - If the state says, "Stop calling homosexuality a sin," we will not obey.
  - If the state says, "Churches must set up a statue of the president and bow to it," we will not obey.
- Can the civil magistrate bind *actions*? That is, can the civil magistrate issue orders which *must* be obeyed, regarding things neither moral nor religious? Yes, the preservation of life and outward well-being of citizens is of primary concern to the civil magistrate. The civil

magistrate has a legitimate interest in gatherings of its citizens and the safety and health concerns created by those gatherings. Your actions at home and in public are already extensively regulated. Open a grocery store in your home. See what happens. Don't stop at red lights. See what happens.

- If the Fire Marshall says that for the sake of safety a given building should only house a certain number of people, we must obey. He is not regulating an element of worship or binding consciences; he is protecting our lives. He has authority to bind our actions.
- If County Health Officials say that a contagious virus is being transmitted through the population and for the sake of safety temporarily ban gatherings of people, we must obey. They are not regulating an element of worship or binding consciences; they are protecting our lives. They have authority to bind our actions.
- If we believe that the civil magistrate's authority in no way reaches to the church, then we must realize that the church's actions are *already* bound in many ways by the government. Offerings are given by church members as an act of worship, yet churches pay property taxes and payroll taxes. Ministers pay state, federal, *and* self-employment taxes. No one complains or regards it as a capitulation that the government requires a significant portion of the funds offered in worship by the church. Why do we observe building codes and other laws relating to the safety of our building and those who gather in it? Why do we comply and obtain permits before altering or constructing on the church's property?
- Is the civil magistrate requiring us to break God's law by prohibiting gatherings of people during a time of perceived or potential pandemic, which in turn prohibits our Sunday assemblies? No.
  - First, on a daily and recurring basis the magistrate already regulates matters pertaining to our outward well-being, such as building codes, occupancy limits, etc. We submit to that authority in numerous ways, none of which are regarded as impinging on worship. Further, on an occasional basis, governors and other authorities have mandated evacuations in times of war or hurricanes. These interrupt Sunday assemblies for a time.
  - Second, preservation of life supersedes ordinary observation of ceremonial duties.
- If we believe that health officials are misjudging the threat, or that their restrictions are unnecessary and overbearing, may we disobey them? No.
  - Submission is not contingent on agreement. Talk to your wife and children.
  - Respecting the authority of superiors also means respecting education, experience, and expertise. Do you have a degree? In what? Are you a virologist or an epidemiologist? Are you charged with the general care of a population of millions?
- If we believe that such officials do not have the right to impose or enforce such regulations on a temporary emergency basis, due to a higher legal right such as the constitution, or if we believe that churches are being treated unfairly in comparison to other institutions in society, may we disobey? Not necessarily, and certainly not rashly. Take it to the court. Be patient and peaceful (1 Thess. 4:10-12).