

Family, the Fifth Commandment, and Culture

by H. L. Richard

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The traditional model of Christian work among Hindus almost always leads to severe family tensions. Anyone familiar with stories of Hindus who have turned to Christ will be familiar with this reality. Historically, the family problems that follow from conversion have been used by Hindu apologists as a point against Christianity. This is seen recently in a statement by Sumir Kalra that “converts are often asked to repudiate their community and family.”¹

This article has been written in response to the problem of the disruption of Hindu families related to discipleship to Jesus. The focus will be the fifth commandment to honor one's father and mother. First, a case study from 2005 will be presented, with names of people and cities hidden or changed. The analysis of a proper understanding of the fifth commandment will be applied to the type of situations presented in the case study. Some careful analysis related to the concept of culture will be necessary before coming to any conclusions.

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A Case Study

An urban middle class family with three grown daughters was disrupted when the three daughters all converted to Christianity. A friend of mine got involved with the family through the recommendation of another follower of Jesus from a Hindu family.

Prema is a dentist, her elder sister is a doctor and her younger sister is an architect. My friend had to listen to the parents vent against Christianity and against their children before he could try to help. The parents were disturbed to the point that Prema's mother said she felt like killing Christians (evangelists). She said she would happily go to jail due to the way they try to convert people, creating so many problems in families. Prema's father said,

I hate even to see my daughters. I spent my life for them, but in return what did I get? They are not even married yet and when I see others of my age with their grandchildren, I feel like madness is coming on. That is why I moved to this new city and settled here.

“Jesus, Jesus and nothing but Jesus for everything,” said Prema’s mother.

They say Jesus is the only god and they can accept no other gods. I have no objection or problem for my daughters to worship Jesus, but why do they go to the church and become “converts” and only obey their pastors?

When the parents pressed my friend about Jesus and faith he expressed his faith in Jesus without conversion to Christianity and his following Jesus within Hindu cultural patterns and forms. When asked about his view on idol worship, a positive response was given (it is good to remember God in some way, rather than yield to total secularization), at the same time pointing out that he no longer practices this. All this intrigued the parents. But this also only further confused the family situation. Prema pointed out that what her parents were saying was not really true; the three sisters had been literally persecuted and once even thrown out of the house to spend a whole night sitting on a staircase outside the house. My friend agreed that in such situations parents will always exaggerate. But it needs to be recognized that it is Christian activities and not faith in Christ that hurt them.

The parents agreed to host a contextual worship service focused on Christ, but in the end it was not feasible to move ahead with this. Prema wanted her parents to hear the gospel, but what good news could they hear when they had experienced Christianity as deeply disruptive? Prema said,

I am neither for nor against a contextual worship service with my parents. I know that you, too, are going to worship Jesus only using Indian forms and symbols, and I am not against it. However, my parents, after a long struggle had accepted me as I am and had no problem with me going to church. But when you shared that you do not go to church but still only worship Jesus, from that day on they again created problems and are not

happy with me going to church. I have nothing against you. You have your conviction about not going to the church, but I have my conviction.

My friend replied that this is why he was asking her to make the decision about his meeting with her parents. His focus was on the parents, and he suggested that this should be her focus also. It is not wrong to go to church for fellowship and to hear the word of God and pray. But in India, when a person goes to a mosque no one thinks that he is going there to worship Allah, but rather that he goes there because he is a Muslim. It is the same with church. Prema’s parents after a long struggle allowed her to go



to church because they knew that as a young woman she had her own rights to do certain things. Since she had become a Christian, they had to tolerate it. But when they saw a different alternative for worshipping the same Jesus, they began again to object to the church pattern.

In the end, these young women chose to stay in the church and force their parents to make adjustments to that reality. My friend walked away, convinced that it is not right to interfere in such family matters. The daughters never contacted him again so there is no update available for this story from over a decade ago.

Interpreting the Fifth Commandment

The fifth commandment to honor one’s father and mother (Ex. 20:12, Deut. 5:16) seems quite simple on the surface. Yet, particularly in the context of religious conversion, it presents some challenges. The New Testament adamantly affirms the validity and importance of the fifth commandment, particularly the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:2 where he refers to this as “the first commandment with a promise,” a promise of blessing from God for those who keep it.

Jesus also affirms this command, both in the controversy with the Pharisees in Matthew 15:4 and in relating to the rich young ruler (Luke 18:20). But the great interpretative challenge lies in reconciling this with Jesus’ very strong words about “hating” one’s parents (Luke 14:26, see also Luke 12:51–53). The harmonizing of these passages is not the point of this paper, so for now it will just be said that the standard interpretation is that Jesus is speaking in hyperbolic terms that are not to be taken literally, as is the case with his command that everyone must forsake everything that they possess (Luke 14:33).

This article approaches the command to honor one’s father and mother from a different perspective, a perspective that explores the depth and breadth of the meaning and application of the command.

Interpreting Old Testament Commands

Jesus himself set a standard for the proper way to interpret Old Testament (OT) commands. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes six examples of OT laws, famously introducing them with the phrase “you have heard that in the past it was said” (Matt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). I will not attempt a detailed analysis of these statements, but this is an odd introductory phrase, especially compared to the standard

way of referring to OT statements as “it is written” (over fifty times in the NT; note especially where Jesus uses this in Matt. 4:4, 6, 7, 10).

The obvious conclusion to draw from this change of terminology is that Jesus in Matthew 5 (as opposed to Matt. 4) was not dealing with the OT commands at face value as such, but rather with their *interpretation*. This perspective is further affirmed by noticing that in the last of the six, Matthew 5:43, Jesus only partially quotes an OT passage and then adds on a phrase that is never in the OT: “hate your enemy.”

This perspective (which is nothing radical, rather the standard understanding) means that Jesus has given us six examples of how to interpret OT commands. Principles that can be discerned from his pattern of interpretation need to be applied to any interpretation of the command to honor fathers and mothers (which is not one of the commands or interpretations explained in the Sermon on the Mount).²

Expansive Meanings of Old Testament Commands

An analysis of the interpretations Jesus put on the six commands that he chose to discuss indicates that he broadened the standard understanding of the command. He made application to internal motivations and not just outward actions, and he recognized that positive duties were being inculcated even when only negative prohibitions were stated. This was the fundamental problem with the standard interpretation of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. They had reduced the commands of God to manageable proportions that supported their self-righteousness. Jesus, by giving God’s understanding of his laws, shows how they had distorted the meaning God intended.

Each of the six commands that Jesus references was given a broader meaning or application than the words

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specifically mention. The command against murder was broadened to also cover anger; the command against breaking oaths was applied to all speech; the command to love your neighbor was broadened to praying for those who persecute you. The command to honor father and mother also, then, in God’s purpose and understanding, has broader meanings than just the immediate reference to parents. This is the main point of this paper, to be addressed below.

Besides this general broader meaning, for a number of these commands Jesus clearly shifted the focus from outward behavior to internal attitudes. This is not clear in all of the six commands Jesus discussed, particularly since the command to love neighbors is already about an internal attitude (the same can be argued regarding the command to honor parents). But the command about adultery is definitely shifted from a focus on external behavior to include the internal attitude. This is also clear when anger is included along with murder. It is interesting that in one of the other incidents where Jesus refers to honoring parents he appeals to Isaiah’s words about honoring with the lips while the heart is wrong (Matt. 15:3–9). The corrupt and legalistic human heart is able to twist even commands to love and honor into outward self-righteous behavior that is not matched by a sincere heart.

The third principle we see is that Jesus understands commands against wrong behavior to also suggest the need for positive behavior. The eye for an eye command is interpreted to mean that one should go an extra mile when one is asked to go just one mile. The command about not breaking oaths is applied to simply speaking the truth in all situations; there is no need for more

than a simple, truthful “yes” or “no.” Most strikingly, the command against murder is turned into a positive and powerful exhortation to seek reconciliation even when it is someone else holding a grudge against you. So, even when you are not at fault in a strained relationship, you are to take initiative for reconciliation or you are not following God’s command not to murder.

So, in taking up the proper understanding and interpretation of the fifth commandment to honor one’s parents it must be recognized that in God’s understanding more than merely parents are involved in the command, more than merely external behavior is intended, and positive actions are to be identified that demonstrate the depth of understanding of the priority of this command in God’s purposes.

The Fuller Meaning of the Fifth Commandment

This principle of seeking to discern the fuller meaning of the commands of God is not a new idea. The principle can be clearly seen in the history of biblical interpretation, even related to the interpretation of the command to honor parents. The catechisms that were central to teaching and discipleship at the time of the Reformation illustrate this principle of developing the broader meaning of the fifth commandment.

Martin Luther’s Larger Catechism of 1529 in paragraph 150 says,

Thus we have two kinds of fathers presented in this commandment, fathers in blood and fathers in office, or those to whom belongs the care of the family, and those to whom belongs the care of the country. Besides these there are yet spiritual fathers . . . those only are called spiritual fathers who govern and guide us by the Word of God.³

So Luther applied the command beyond physical parents to include governmental authorities and spiritual leaders.

John Calvin's Genevan Catechism of 1545 in Question 194 similarly stated that "Though father and mother only are expressed, we must understand all who are over us...."⁴

The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 followed on the same line:

104. Q. What does God require in the fifth commandment?

A. That I show all honour, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all those in authority over me, submit myself with due obedience to their good instruction and discipline, and also have patience with their weaknesses and shortcomings, since it is God's will to govern us by their hand.⁵

Lastly, the Westminster Larger Catechism of 1647 has eleven questions and answers related to the fifth commandment, three of which are given here:

Q. 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.

Q. 127. What is the honor that inferiors owe to their superiors?

A. The honor which inferiors owe to their superiors is, all due reverence in heart, word, and behavior; prayer and thanksgiving for them; imitation of their virtues and graces; willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels; due submission to their corrections; fidelity to, defense, and maintenance of their persons and authority, according to their several ranks, and the nature of their places; bearing with their infirmities, and covering them in love, that so they may be an honor to them and to their government.

Q. 128. What are the sins of inferiors against their superiors?

A. The sins of inferiors against their superiors are, all neglect of the duties required toward them; envying at, contempt of, and rebellion against, their persons and places, in their lawful counsels, commands, and corrections; cursing, mocking, and all such refractory and scandalous carriage, as proves a shame and dishonor to them and their government.⁶

Noteworthy in these statements from the Westminster Catechism is that it follows the earlier Reformation catechisms in moving beyond parental authority to authority in the state and to spiritual authority. It is also clear that internal attitudes are covered in the command (under question 127, "all due reverence in heart"). Nonetheless, in



good Protestant fashion, the catechism makes clear that there are limits on these authorities (under question 127, note the term "lawful" in "willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels").

Hindu Context Reflections

Shifting from a Reformation context to contexts related to Hindu families and society, there are other distinctives which need to be highlighted. It seems odd that the Reformation catechisms did not expand on other familial authorities besides father and mother, although that is implied at times. In Indian contexts, it is clear that biological mother and father are only part of the respect due to family; grandparents,

eldest brother, and father's eldest brother should all be named as others to whom honor is clearly due. But that can and should be generalized into respect for the extended family and its traditions.

Culture and Family

Family is where a child is nurtured into the ways of a culture. Family is also a shock absorber for all the crises and conflicts that develop during this process. Family is almost inseparable from culture; cultural attitudes determine many aspects of the role and function of families, while families pass on the values and attitudes of a culture. Recognizing this reality suggests that honoring parents and family is almost inseparable from honoring culture and one's cultural heritage.

The Concept of Culture

Culture in its modern meaning is still a rather recent idea. Charles Taber points this out in his study of culture in modern Protestant missions:

The experience of immersion and participation in a culture is universal and ubiquitous: all human beings live in culture as fish live in water. It is a quite different matter, however, to have an explicit and self-conscious concept of culture. Such a concept, in fact, is as recent as the nineteenth century. In the absence of a formal concept, people tend to take their own culture for granted and not to reflect critically on it. (1991, 1)

Harvie Conn went further, identifying the understanding of cultures as a plural and holistic reality to the work of Franz Boas (1858–1942, professor of anthropology at Columbia University from 1896 until his death).

Boas shifted attention from the general idea of "culture" to the reality that every society possesses its own culture. Each culture is an integrated way of life, not merely an aggregate of separate elements. (1984, 97)⁷

Recognizing that it was only in the twentieth century that this modern

understanding of culture was embraced brings understanding about the lack of theologizing about this concept in the history of Christian thought. The Reformers could not have expanded the meaning of the fifth commandment to include honoring cultural traditions since the very concept of “cultural traditions” had not yet been born.

The Bible on Culture

Since culture is a modern concept, it clearly is not mentioned in the Bible. Two fundamental biblical truths underlie any valid theologizing about culture. First is that men and women are made in the image of God, thus are creative like their Creator.⁸ To be human is to create culture, and human cultures reflect the image of God. But the second fundamental truth is the reality of the Fall and human sinfulness. Nothing that is human in this world is untouched by sin, and that includes all cultures and every aspect of all cultures.⁹

The challenge of biblical thinking about culture lies in holding both of these truths simultaneously, which means always being appreciative of culture but at the same time never being naïve about evil. This, however, is not distinctly different from the similar tension that exists in relation to honoring parents and honoring spiritual leaders. We are never to be naïve about the reality of sin still present in spiritual leaders and in family elders; but we are to honor them in spite of their weaknesses and failings.

A proper interpretation of the fifth commandment applies its mandate and promise beyond biological parents to include the heritage being passed on by those parents in the form of cultural norms and patterns and attitudes. Honoring one’s cultural heritage does not mean blindly following every aspect of a culture; it does not imply that nothing will be done towards cultural transformation (cultures are, after all, always changing). But it rules out

contempt of, and rebellion against... [and] cursing, mocking, and all such

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to that cultural heritage (quotations from the Westminster Larger Catechism question 128 above).

Cultural Rebels?

It is tragic that mission history has at times produced rebels against local cultures. The case study that opens this paper is a clear example of this. No doubt the daughters in this case study were trying to honor their parents, but they did not recognize that abandoning the culture and community in which they had been raised made it impossible to do so. Often in India respect for elders is shown by touching (in some cases even prostrating at) the feet of the elder. Many Christians actively teach against this as a form of idolatry, but there is no reasonable basis for such an extreme interpretation of an acceptable cultural behavior. Similar objections are raised to death memorial ceremonies. It is through such cultural ceremonies that honor is shown; honoring parents while not honoring their cultural heritage is not possible!

Missiological understanding has progressed greatly over the past few centuries. Contextualization is now a widely accepted concept, that local cultural contexts are not to be violated in favor of the home culture of the cross-cultural worker. Yet there are still serious shortcomings in much cross-cultural practice, as illustrated in the case study which opens this paper. There is a natural tendency for someone who is touched by Christ to mimic the attitudes and behaviors of their mentors, and that often leads to unrecognized shifts in cultural behavior and attitudes.

Converted Out of a Culture?

“Conversion” is a loaded term that carries many connotations, some of which are decidedly unsavory among non-Christians.¹⁰ In practice, conversion often involves unnecessary changes of culture, and a proper understanding of the command to honor father and mother must impact this situation. No one should ever be converted out of a culture, rather they should be turned (the basic biblical meaning of “conversion”) more deeply into their culture.¹¹ A striking biblical example of honoring an unworthy father will help clarify this.

A Biblical Example (Noah)

No one includes the story of Noah’s drunkenness among their favorite Bible stories, yet God saw fit to place it in scripture for our edification. In Gen. 9:21, Noah is drunk and naked, and his youngest son, Ham, saw this and informed his two older brothers. The text gives little detail about Ham, causing commentators over the centuries to exaggerate the wrongfulness of his behavior. But the focus is on the appropriate behavior of the two brothers who carefully cover their father’s nakedness (Gen. 9:23).

Noah’s behavior is not condemned, but is clearly wrong. The passage is in the Bible because of Noah’s prophetic blessing and curse placed on his descendants related to this incident. Yet it also provides a striking example of what it means to honor father and mother. This honoring, in biblical understanding, clearly extends even to a wayward father and his wayward actions.

Many years ago a friend of mine who is from a Hindu family but follows Christ stated, at least somewhat facetiously, that it is very easy to be

popular in the church among Christians. One needs only to talk against Hindus and Hinduism. Traditional testimonies often highlight the darkness of Hinduism (or Islam, Buddhism, etc.) in an attempt to honor Christ. But a genuine honoring of Christ counterintuitively must refuse such speech and actions. Christ affirms the fifth commandment and exemplifies interpreting that command in a broad rather than narrow manner. To honor Christ one must refuse to mock one's cultural heritage; one must even take extraordinary steps to cover over the sin and shame in their heritage, as Noah's sons covered him. Of course, Noah's sons were not to participate in the wayward actions of their father, and neither should followers of Christ adopt everything of the attitudes and actions of their cultures; but even in disagreeing, there is to be a genuine honoring from the heart.

Conclusion

While missiological thought has progressed and appreciation for the multitudes of cultures in the world has developed, there still needs to be a warmer and stronger embrace of the varied cultures of new disciples of Christ. This becomes increasingly in need of emphasis as globalization influences the spread of Western pop culture. J. H. Bavinck pointed out that the basic approach to culture should be *possessio*, the taking possession for Christ of all the world's cultures.¹²

A proper understanding of the fifth commandment shows that a cynical view of local cultures leads to a violation of the core ethical standards defined by God. Honoring one's father and mother involves the honoring of culture; teaching (by precept or example) others to dishonor their cultural heritage undermines the fundamental purpose of God for societies and families.

How different the case study that opens this paper could have been! Daughters taught to honor their parents and

culture could have been a powerful influence for good in the family and wider society. But a cynical attitude to traditional culture and the embracing of Western Christian patterns of life and thought brought disruption to the family and shame to the name of Christ and the cause of the gospel. Christians follow the pattern of Ham and happily expose what they perceive to be the weaknesses of other cultural heritages; the way of Ham's brothers reflects the way of Christ. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ "US Religious Freedom Commission Report: A Case Built To Peddle Hinduphobia," accessed March 11, 2017, <https://swarajyamag.com/ideas/us-religious-freedom-commission-report-a-case-built-to-peddle-hinduphobia>. This is not a fair paper, and this is not an entirely fair accusation. But Christians are certainly not free from fault in this matter of regular family tensions, and a proper understanding of the fifth commandment certainly does not exonerate Christian practices in this area.

² Why Jesus chose the particular six commands he chose is an interesting topic beyond the scope of this paper. One might persuasively argue that Jesus would have presented far more than six such illustrations, which would shift the argument to why Matthew chose to include these six in his record of the teaching of Jesus.

³ From "The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Lutheran Church," accessed March 11, 2017, <http://bookof-concord.org/lc-3-tencommandments.php>. Note that Luther's comments are on the fourth commandment as he followed the traditional Roman Catholic division of the commandments.

⁴ From "Catechism of the Church of Geneva" by John Calvin, accessed March 11, 2017, http://reformed.org/documents/calvin/geneva_catachism/geneva_catachism.html.

⁵ "Heidelberg Catechism," accessed March 11, 2017, <https://students.wts.edu/resources/creeds/heidelberg.html>.

⁶ "Larger Catechism with Scripture Proofs," 265-269, accessed Mar. 11, 2017, <http://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Larger-Catechismwith-ScriptureProofs2.pdf>.

⁷ The earlier concept of "culture" as a singular reality is still occasionally in use; it is an elitist concept of "high culture," or

"the habits of the social elite; disciplined tastes expressed in the arts, literature and entertainment" (Conn 2000, 252).

⁸ This statement is not meant to suggest that creativity sufficiently defines the image of God; the image of God is a richly suggestive phrase that is never defined in scripture.

⁹ Nothing is more basic to culture and cultural differences than the differences in languages across the world. That language differences are recognized even beyond this world (Rev. 5:9; 7:9) suggests that cultural distinctions will not be erased even in the world to come (consider the implications of Rev. 21:24-26 also).

¹⁰ In India the core understanding of conversion relates to leaving the sociological community of one's birth and joining a different "people group." Conversions to and from Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam all take place, and spirituality is not perceived to have anything to do with the process, and often indeed does not have anything to do with it.

¹¹ There may be a few extreme cases, such as cannibalistic tribes, where the central cultural stand of a group must be rejected, but this paper is not dealing with such cases.

¹² I have briefly outlined this position and some needed qualifications in Richard 2011.

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