

DOES CULTURE ALTER GOD'S COMMANDS?

A. **Did you ever read** a command or an instruction in the Bible & wonder if it applied to you?

1. Did you ever wonder if you were doing everything God expects you do?
2. Do you ever feel like you're leaving something undone?

B. **First of all**, we can know exactly what God expects from us.

1. His commands are not mysterious or vague.
2. We may have to work at it, but we can understand every command that God has directed specifically TO US (2 Tim 2:15; 3:15-17; Eph 3:3-4, 8-9).

C. **The rules of hermeneutics** (Bible interpretation) are fairly simple.

1. Who is speaking or writing?
2. To whom is he speaking or writing?
3. What were the circumstances?
 - a. We take orders from Christ, His apostles & the NT authors under the direction of the HS: by direct statement or command, apostolic example, necessary conclusions.
 - b. We understand that some commands & examples apply to us as individuals, & some apply to the local church.
 - c. We view OT as a source of learning by example what God expected & demanded of His people then (a point of view that we learned in the NT – Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11).

[But when is a command in the NT limited to people in a specific culture, so that it does not apply to us today?

Is that ever the case? Yes.

But the danger is that there are many people who want to do away with certain NT commands, claiming that they only applied to the Christians in that 1st century culture.]

I. COMMANDS BELIEVED TO BE LIMITED TO A CULTURE

A. Is the command against homosexuality limited to the people of a certain culture (Gen 19:7; Lev 18:22; Rom 1:26-28; 1 Cor 6:9-11)?

[Fact: God condemned homosexuality & commanded repentance of that sin in three cultures, which covered three dispensations: Patriarchal, Mosaical, & Christian.]

B. Is the command that wives be in submission to their husbands limited to the people of a certain culture (Eph 5:22, 24)?

[Fact: If wives are not required to be in submission to their husbands in our culture, then the church is not required to be in submission to Christ.]

C. Is the command that women NOT teach in the assembly limited to the people of a certain culture (1 Cor 14:34-35; 1 Tim 2:11-14)?

[Fact: Paul did not tie this command to a culture, but to divine “law” (Gen 3:16). He illustrated the importance of that law by reminding them of what happened in the Garden.]

D. Is the command to sing only limited to the people of a certain culture (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16)?

[Fact: The worship of God through song is not a cultural response to God, but a response of His children who desire to worship Him in “spirit” & “truth” (Jn 4:24).]

E. Is the command to dress modestly, covering the body, limited to the people of a certain culture (Deut 22:5; 1 Tim 2:8-10; 1 Pet 3:1-6; Gen 3:7, 21; Exo 20:26; 28:42; Isa 20:3-5; 47:2-3; Ezek 16:7)?

[Fact: The principles of modesty that God established in the Garden He commanded in all three dispensations of time: Patriarchal, Mosaical & Christian.

We cannot point to a certain culture as the reason we ought to alter God's principles on anything.

But are there any commands in the Bible that are limited to the people in the culture in which they were given?]

II. COMMANDS LIMITED TO A CULTURE

A. Foot-washing (John 13:3-9).

1. Is Jesus binding this *particular act* of service upon Christians of all times, or is it a command limited to that culture?
2. Foot-washing was a custom of the culture in Jesus' time, along with a kiss of greeting & oil for the head (Luke 7:44-46).

3. A widow "taken into the number" of widows supported by the church were required to have "washed the saint's feet" (1 Tim 5:10).

- a. This was an act of service that indicated her desire to be hospitable to travelers.
- b. But the passage implies that some Christian widows might not have ever done this.

[Fact: Jesus was not establishing a new religious custom for the church; He was demonstrating through a custom of His culture that love means service.]

B. The Holy Kiss (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Pet 5:14).

1. Is Paul binding this *particular form* of greeting upon Christians of all times, or is it a command limited to that culture?

- a. One way to tell is whether or not we are given any instructions on how to perform it.
 - b. Do we kiss one side of the face or both sides?
Do we kiss the hand, forehead or lips?
2. Since we are not given any instructions about how to do this, & since it hasn't been described for us, then we must assume that it was a command limited to that culture.
 3. Let me hastily add, that I believe we must obey the spirit of this command, which is to greet each other with expressions of love & unity.
 - a. We customarily shake hands.

[Fact: Paul was not establishing a new religious custom for the church; He was exhorting Christians through a custom of his culture to greet one another when they came together, & to express their deep affection for each other.]

C. The Head Covering (1 Cor 11:3-5).

1. Is Paul binding the *head covering* for Christian women of all times (in the assembly), or is it a command limited to that culture?
2. Let's examine the evidence:
 - a. We are given no other NT passages addressing this subject.
 - b. We are given no descriptions of its appearance (what it looks like).
 - c. The custom already existed in the Corinthian culture; Paul did not establish a new custom.

“The preponderance of evidence points toward the public head covering as a universal custom in the first century in both Jewish culture & Greco-Roman culture. The nature of the covering varied considerably, but it was commonly a portion of the outer garment drawn up over the head like a hood” (David K. Lowery).

Veils were an essential article of female attire.

Apparently, the women in Corinth were discarding a token of their womanhood because they had the miraculous gifts just as the men (1 Cor 14:34).

- d. The command especially applied to those times when a Christian woman was using her spiritual gift in “praying & prophesying”.
- e. Paul’s point about the need for “*a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels*” (11:10) – simply argues that even angels must respect the authority of the head above them.
- f. Paul’s point about “*nature itself...*” (11:13-15), does NOT imply that they were born with the innate knowledge that a woman praying uncovered was just as shameful as a man with long hair.

- 1) “Nature” – a mode of feeling & acting which by long habit has become nature (Thayer).
- 2) It was not always shameful for a man to have long hair (Num 6:6; 2 Sam 14:26) – though some shameful people had long hair.
- 3) Paul was illustrating his point that if the Corinthians ignored the proper customs of their culture, they would be committing a shameful act – that would inhibit the spread of the gospel.

[**Fact:** In Corinth, the veil represented authority & the distinct roles of male & female; wearing it was a cultural symbol of subordination.]

D. **Even though** foot-washing, the holy kiss & the covering are not enjoined upon Christians today, we must understand & accept the timeless, godly principles behind the commands.

1. Foot-washing is about serving one another in love.
2. The holy kiss is about greeting each other with expressions of love.
3. The woman's head covering is about the woman accepting her role under the headship of her husband.

2. But we may have to “be diligent to present ourselves approved to God” to know the difference (2 Tim 2:15).

CLOSING

- A. **There is compelling** scriptural evidence to show that some of God's commands were limited by culture & would not apply to Christians outside that culture.

1. This is not to say that we have a right to arbitrarily decide which of God's commands are binding upon us & which ones are not.