

Interpreting Ancient Biblical Practices in a Modern Context

One of the challenges facing Christians wanting to be faithful to the word of God is figuring out how to deal with passages that feature activities which seem to belong to a different culture and time.

Foot washing is a good example. When Jesus said, “you also ought to wash one another’s feet,” did He intend for us to follow this exactly as a command-ment? Have we been falling short of Jesus’ word all these years because we’ve never performed a foot washing ceremony?

God inspired every word of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16–17). God designed His word to be eternal, equally applicable to every age (Isaiah 40:8).

But, since the Scriptures were written at a fixed point in time, there are practices that no longer exist. We must think a little bit to figure out what God intends us to do, in order to correctly obey His word.

Washing Feet

In John 13:1–17 Jesus girded Himself with a towel, filled a bowl with water, and went to each of His disciples washing their feet. When finished He said, If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.

If we are to be faithful to the Scriptures, shouldn’t we obey this literally? If it’s too inconvenient to strip off each other’s socks and shoes every Sunday, shouldn’t we at least recognize an annual holiday in which we perform this ritual?

I don’t think this was Jesus intention at all. Foot washing is a feature limited to a different culture. In ancient times, travelers walked all day on dusty roads with sandaled feet. Washing the feet before reclining at the low dinner table (where your feet were often thrust in your neighbor’s face) was necessary and practiced frequently by Jews and Gentiles alike. We don’t wash feet nowadays because our customs are different. We wear closed-toed shoes, have better hygiene, walk on sidewalks, and eat at dinner tables.

In fact, if I showed up with a towel and basin to start washing feet, I would probably be viewed as weird or creepy. Worse, imagine trying to “fulfill” the cultural practice of Abraham’s day (Gen. 24:2), to slip my hand under someone’s thigh to make a promise (especially when I read that, according to rabbinical scholars, Abraham probably wasn’t referring to the thigh).

Instead, we must seek to understand Jesus' principle, and then apply it to our modern situation. The eternal principle is to humble ourselves in service. Even the highest must lower himself. The preacher can trade his suit for overalls and come over and unclog your toilet. All members can report to workdays and mop the floors and weed the flowerbeds in service to one another. The elders can invite you over for dinner. No job is too menial when done in love and service to our brothers and sisters in Christ. That's the correct interpretation.

A Greeting Kiss

Repeatedly the Scriptures tell us to greet our brethren "with a holy kiss" (1 Peter 5:8, 1 Thess. 5:26, 1 Cor. 16:20). In Peter and Paul's time, kissing was the usual way of greeting. Even men kissed men, a peck on each cheek, a practice that you can still see today in the Arab world. Must we learn to pucker up if we are to follow the word of God?

No, because kissing in greeting is part of a different culture. Today, in the US, handshakes, smiles, eye-contact, and an occasional embrace signify a warm and cheerful greeting. If we greet our brethren this way, we have obeyed God.

If, on the other hand, we rush in at the last minute and rush out at the first minute, to get our dose of worship without having to talk to anyone, or if we cross the pews to avoid certain members, then we disobey. The body is supposed to be friendly (3 John 15).

Shaking the Dust off The Feet

Jesus, in Matthew 10:14 and Luke 10:10–12, commands disciples to "shake the dust off your feet" when leaving a house or city where the people refuse to obey.

That too, had meaning in the ancient world that it simply lacks today. Still, there is a principle here we could do better about obeying. Often when someone refuses the gospel, we "agree to disagree" and act like it's no big deal.

Instead, our reaction needs to be unambiguous. Everything is not OK. They are condemned. They have rejected our Master, the Lord, and we should be upset about it. We don't have to stop being friends (though, maybe we do in some cases); but certainly our disappointment and protest needs to be obvious. Don't stand next to them on the Day of Judgment having not made yourself very clear.

Braiding the Hair

In 1 Timothy 2:9–10, Paul says, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness. In ancient Greco-Roman culture, wealthy women spent hours on their hair, working fine gold threads and even gemstones into elaborate weaves. These were expensive, time-consuming, and ostentatious.

Times, and fashions, have changed. Braiding the hair is now one of the simplest, least flashy ways to go. If you braid your hair, don't feel that you have sinned. The correct interpretation is to avoid gobbling up all your time and money worrying about an immaculate and flamboyant appearance. That time and money is better spent on serving Christ.

Caution!

Please do not misunderstand me! Let me carefully point out that this method of interpretation must not be overused. It only applies to a cultural practice that has gone by the wayside. I would argue that the head covering in 1 Cor. 11, and anointing with oil in James 5, are similar examples.

But it does NOT apply to every principle we wish to ignore. For example, many readers suggest that Paul's prohibition of women leading in church, or his prohibition of homosexuality, are simply parts of his ancient culture. We've moved on, and can safely ignore those passages.

No, those are still issues that are very much alive today, and Paul spoke plainly against them for all time. Paul taught it because God taught it (see vv. 13–14). —John Guzzetta