

# Biblical Absolutes and Cultural Variation

by T. Wayne Dye

## *The Issue*

While cross-cultural disagreements about what is morally right have long been a staple of daily life for missionaries everywhere, people back home are increasingly faced with similar disagreements and the questions they raise. Such conflicts on moral issues cause interpersonal misunderstanding and friction, and often contribute to our society's claim that ethical decisions are matters of personal taste.

As my wife, Sally, and I have wrestled with these issues over many years, we have come to believe there are basic scriptural answers that alleviate many of these conflicts. In her article in this issue of the *IJFM* (pp. 15–25) “Cultural Variation in Conscience: Part of God’s Design,” Sally has written about how culture and conscience affect the way a Christian needs to obey God. The present article explains why fully mature Christians do not all obey biblical commands in the same way.

For years we thought there was only one way to obey the commands—the way we were first taught to do it.<sup>1</sup> As Bible translators, we had to give a people group the whole Bible. Once they had it, they would surely obey the plain meaning of its words by living as we tried to live. Although missionaries and college teachers have often taught their way as the only right way (and expected everyone to obey the commands in that way), there is considerable variation in how the commands should be followed.

One problem is that we Westerners don’t obey all commandments in the same way. We take some passages literally and obey them carefully, while ignoring other passages. We don’t literally “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16, NIV<sup>2</sup>). We don’t drink wine to help our digestion (1 Timothy 5:23). We don’t pray each day at 3:00 p.m., the “time of prayer” (Acts 3:1). We don’t wash the feet of others, except on rare and very special occasions (John 13:14). My wife does not wear a head covering in church while in the United States (1 Corinthians 11:2–16).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, there are many such commands in the New Testament.<sup>4</sup>

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This “selective obedience” is not only a characteristic of American churches. All the Christians that we have encountered around the world have been selective at some point. This raises the question: are we following a biblical selection principle or making a mistake?

Such inconsistencies are more obvious when we look at the Old Testament, which was the “Bible” of the New Testament church. When Jesus and the Apostles quoted Scripture it was always the Old Testament. The New Testament explicitly teaches that the Old Testament is to be obeyed.

2 Timothy 3:16–17 says:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

When Paul wrote this about the Old Testament he was agreeing with the Old Testament itself. Its commands are clearly stated, and the importance of obeying them is strongly emphasized. For instance, Deuteronomy 10:12–13 says:

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

There are many such passages. Yet when we turn to the Pentateuch, we find commands that apparently were for everyone everywhere thoroughly mixed in with commands that few follow today. Leviticus 19 provides some examples. Verse 13 says, “Do not defraud or rob your neighbor.” Surely that should be followed today. The verse then goes on to say, “Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.” No Christian organization in my country obeys that. Verse 18 says, “... love your neighbor as yourself,” surely a universal commandment. The very next verse says, “Do not mate different kinds of animals.... Do not wear clothing

woven of two kinds of material.” What would we tropical missionaries do without our polyester and cotton clothing?

Verse 26 says, “Do not practice divination or seek omens.” We would like to teach that to our animist friends. But what if they go on to read the next verse? It says, “Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.” Rarely do male Christian missionaries follow this command. There are many such commandments, about leaving food for gleaners, providing loans with no interest at all, leaving land lie fallow, and selling land back to its original owner after fifty years; we do not follow any of these literally today.



### *Key Passages on the Nature of True Obedience*

We have now come to believe that the approach of Christians through the ages has been right for them. Christians of most denominations have read the Bible from their own cultural perspective and interpreted its commands in ways appropriate to their own cultures. This intuitive understanding was reasonably good in mono-cultural situations. It only fails to work when people from two different cultures interact. The missionary problem has come because we did not really understand the host people’s basis for making decisions, and so we often applied biblical teachings as if the believers in other cultures were just like us.

In the pages that follow, I hope to enable us to see how we evangelicals intuitively interpret the Bible in our own cultural situations. Once we understand the process, we can make it clear so Christians in other cultures and sub-cultures can use it in their own situations.

### **Can People Obey the Same Command Differently?**

In two remarkable passages in the epistles, Paul showed that truly obedient Christians from different cultures would, in some cases, do quite different things. 1 Corinthians 8–10 and Romans 14 are worth careful study for cross-cultural ministry today.

Corinth was a center of idol worship. The worshipper in this context paid for an animal sacrifice, then took part in eating the meat. The rest of the meat was sold, either in the temple court or in the market place. Now the average person in that pre-industrial society could not often afford meat. With so many sacrifices being offered each day, it is likely that meat sacrificed to idols would fulfill most of the community’s demand for meat.

This situation raised a problem for believers who wanted to eat meat without taking part in idol worship. Mature Gentile believers (or believers from Jewish backgrounds) argued that eating such meat made no difference. Others, especially those newly converted from idolatrous backgrounds, felt guilty about eating such meat. For this reason, believers in Corinth asked Paul to speak to the issue. His answer was complex, and followed a discourse structure not often used today, so the steps in his reasoning are sometimes missed.

### **Idols Are Not Real So Eating Meat Is OK**

Paul began by emphasizing love over mere knowledge, then went on to say that idols are not really supernatural beings at all.

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that

"There is no God but one." For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. (1 Corinthians 8:4-6)

Paul agreed that this gave freedom to those with "strong faith," those who had a truly Christian worldview in this matter. He even said in his later summary instructions to go ahead and eat any food bought in the market or served by an unbeliever. It is clear from this that there is nothing inherently wrong with eating such food, nothing that would hurt a mature Christian.

But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. (1 Corinthians 8:8)

Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. (1 Corinthians 10:25-27)

### If Someone Believes the Idol Is Real Then Don't Eat the Meat

There is another aspect to consider, however. Paul said that those who had a "weak conscience," i.e., did not have a biblical understanding of idols, were sinning if they ate meat offered to idols.

But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.... Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother,

**F**or people with a different worldview, however, that activity is a sin that can destroy their faith in Christ.

for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall. (1 Corinthians 8:7-13)

Paul saw this conflict as so critical that he urged mature Christians to be aware of who was watching and how others might interpret their actions. Cross-cultural witnesses must seek the good of others, and this includes avoiding any actions that might lead them to sin if they uncritically made the same choice.

"have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others... But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience I am referring to the other person's conscience, not yours.... So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. (1 Corinthians 10: 23, 28-29, 31-33)

### Not One Right Way But Two

Here is a remarkable teaching. A specific activity (eating meat offered to idols) is right—and even encouraged—for those with one worldview and therefore a certain understanding of right and wrong. For people with a different worldview, however, that activity is a sin that can destroy their faith in Christ.

Furthermore, no one has a right to judge the actions of others.

For why is my freedom being judged by another's conscience? If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for? (1 Corinthians 10:29b-30)

To be sure, believers have a responsibility not to be a "stumbling block" by influencing another to do what is wrong for him. Yet, that just emphasizes the point; what is right for one can be wrong for another. That is why we can hurt others by doing something we could otherwise do in good conscience. In order to see how this could be, we need to look at just why eating food offered to idols was wrong for some people. 1 Corinthians 10:18-21 provides the clue.

Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.

In both Jewish and Middle Eastern Gentile cultures of that day, one worshipped a god by eating the food that had been sacrificed. Jews and Gentiles worshipped in the same way by eating a sacrifice—but with different objects of worship. When Gentiles worshipped idols they were sinning because they were choosing to worship something other than the true God. Satan and his demons are the true beneficiaries of all such rebellious worship.

Yet Paul made it clear that a Corinthian's actions while sacrificing to an idol

meant nothing in themselves, because the idol was not a deity at all. As this and all other biblical passages emphasize, an idol is nothing but a piece of dead wood or stone or gold. It is the intent thought of the worshiper that causes a given action to become worship. Worship is a matter of meaning. It is an act intended to give homage to a deity. An atheist who joins in singing in a hymn of praise at a church is not worshipping even though the Christians standing beside him singing the same hymn are. People who still believe an idol is a god when eating meat offered to it are worshipping that idol. However, if they have come to understand that the idol is nothing but a statue, they can no longer worship it because they do not believe there is a god there to worship. When they eat meat they are not sacrificing; they are merely eating meat.

We have taken time with this point because it has profound implications. The Corinthian believers were a test case for the central point of a cross-culturally valid Christian ethic. At some level every human action expresses one's relationship to God and his commandments, either in obedience or disobedience; that is its ethical and spiritual meaning. People with one worldview might be obeying God by their action, since they are not going against any of God's commandments. Someone with another worldview might be disobeying God by doing what appears to be the same thing because at the level of intention the two actions are quite different.

Note that in Paul's test case it is the more mature Christian who is free to eat the sacrificed meat. We recognize that God is gentle with new Christians, but as they mature God shows them more and better ways to obey. One might expect God's patience with new believers to be the explanation of this passage, but in this case the new converts who still believed the idol was real were more restricted in what they could do. The more mature Christians

who no longer believed in idols had greater freedom.<sup>5</sup> Romans 14 provides a more general example.

### Doing Right in Rome

The early church at Rome must have reflected the multi-cultural character of the city itself. Jewish and Gentile Christians had come together from many different parts of the empire. They were trying to get along, but in ways important to them they were living quite differently. Some Christians were vegetarians, perhaps to avoid eating meat offered to idols. Others ate everything. Some Christians kept the Jewish holy days; others did not. Paul's answer followed the same reasoning as he used with the Corinthians.



Accept him whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. (Romans 14:1-5)

### Each Is to Do What He Is Convinced God Wants Him to Do

Each believer must follow what he thinks is right, being "fully convinced in his own mind." And he must do so without judging others, not looking down on them or condemning them for having different convictions. Those other people are also servants of God, and it is the meaning of their action as an expression of their relationship to God that really counts. In that regard, "...the Lord is able to make [them] stand." Romans 14, verses 6 through 9 make the point more clear.

Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. (Romans 14:6-9)

In other words, each of us is continuously in relationship to God; we are never alone. He is our "Lord," our boss, our commander, the one who has a right to tell us what to do in every aspect of our lives. Every action has this dimension of relationship, and it is in this respect (and no other) that right and wrong are determined. Paul went on to say the food we eat is of no importance in itself. If, however, someone believes that he should not eat a particular food, then he is disobeying by eating that food because he is going against his perception of God's will.

I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.... So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat,

because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin. (Romans 14:14, 22–23)

### Don't Influence Others to Do What Is Wrong for Them

Paul made a further point about the way we interact with those who have a different understanding of what is right. We must be careful not to judge others, for “each of us will give an account of ourselves to God” (Romans 14:12). At the same time, we must not do anything that will lead others astray by doing what is right for us but not for them.

You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.... If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. Therefore, do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall. (Romans 14:10, 13, 15-21)

If all Christians were required to act alike—what is right for one culture being right for all others—this problem would not exist. It would be impossible to lead others to stumble and fall through imitating behavior that is acceptable for another person in similar circumstances. Paul's key point is that indeed there are proper differences in behavior at some points.

## **T**hese four basic principles can account for both the absolute authority of the Bible and the proper role of cultural variation.

The matter of not misleading others follows from those differences.

Paul's argument here is entirely consistent with his whole approach to working with Gentiles. God demands that all people obey the same commandments; however, in some subtle but important ways just how this obedience must be lived out is different for different peoples. How can this be, without the result being chaos? What biblical principles provide for this variation within a framework of universal commandments? In the next section, I attempt to formulate these principles.

### *The Way to Obey God in Any Culture*

Taken together the four basic principles below can account for both the absolute authority of the Bible and the proper role of cultural variation in determining how a given command applies. These four principles lead to a three-step procedure for applying a passage.

**Principle 1. All of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, is authoritative over all people, in every age and culture.**

All passages are for our benefit. No commandments can be freely disregarded; no examples are to be ignored. Scripture is much more than a guide for action; it is our “Manufacturer's Handbook” telling us all how to live.<sup>6</sup>

**Principle 2. Though all Scripture was written for everyone, it was not written to everyone.**

The author of each Scripture passage was communicating a message specifically to the original receptors, and it is this message that is the original meaning of the passage. Everyone else is an onlooker who must deduce from what was said to the original audience what God is saying to him now.

Two New Testament passages, which describe how believers today are to learn from the Old Testament, serve to clarify this principle. 1 Corinthians 10:6–11 tells of Old Testament events, which “occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.” Hebrews 11 recounts numerous Old Testament examples that should be followed. Present day believers must decide whether the example is one that we should avoid or emulate by determining what each person did in his situation and how the Bible speaks about his actions. We then work out what those actions mean for us in our situations today. It is helpful to see how the early church interpreted the Old Testament, because the various first century churches were not all in the same situations either. They were richer or poorer, had different ethnic traditions, were more or less in danger of persecution, and differed in other significant ways as well.

**Principle 3. It is the core meaning, the underlying universal teaching, of every passage of Scripture that is universally applicable in every culture.** Every command and every example has a core meaning. Passages that were originally intended to be universal have a core meaning that is the same as the passage. “You shall not steal” has the same basic meaning everywhere. Most passages, however, describe an unusual situation or provide a set of instructions to particular people that are not necessarily widely applicable. In those passages, the core meaning must be derived from the situation and the passage. The core teaching is always applicable to every human being at every point in history, although the applications will be somewhat different in different situations. It is this universal core meaning which we properly call a “biblical absolute.”



This point will become clearer from the three-step procedure for discovering and then applying the core meaning.

Because the fourth principle is different in character, we will review the common process for discovering and applying the meaning of a biblical passage before introducing it. The steps are straightforward and simple. They are worth going over carefully, though, because cross-cultural application can sometimes be quite difficult.

### *A Three-Step Procedure for Discovering and Applying the Core Meaning*

**Step 1. Determine** “*What did it say to them?*” Who were the intended readers, the original “receptors”? What was their situation, their context? What meaning did the human author apparently intend them to get from the communication?

**Step 2. Discern** “*What does it mean?*” What is the underlying universal here? What is the core meaning? How could this be phrased in more general terms? Because humans are alike in important respects (Dye, T. W. 1987, 42–43), their situation is everyone’s situation at some time or another. It is good to try to state this underlying universal meaning in plain words.

**Step 3. Ask** “*What does it mean to me?*” How does this universal meaning apply to us and to our hearers, friends, or colleagues here and now? This is where the rubber meets the road. This step is often the easiest to do if we are applying the meaning to ourselves or to someone like us.<sup>7</sup> If the application is to a different culture, then we will have trouble discerning how to apply it. Cross-cultural workers will have to rely heavily on help from persons inside that culture to do so.

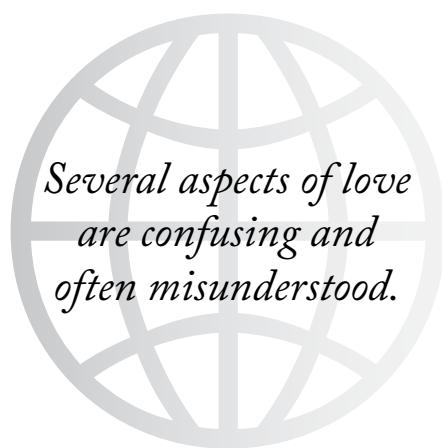
This leads us to the fourth principle.

### **Principle 4. Biblical commands are there to help us love God and other people.**

This principle is both the most important and the one to be invoked last. Paul put its relationship to the other laws this way:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13: 8–10)

The purpose of all of those commandments about inter-personal relationships is to help us know how to genuinely love others. In a sense, there are only two over-riding commandments: love God first and your neighbor as yourself. All the rest are detailed instructions about how to obey these two.



### ***Understanding How to Love Others Is Complicated***

We humans are not able to know how to love others in a righteous manner, so it is spelled out for us in the many ethical teachings of the Bible. Paul made it clear what love is in 1 Corinthians 13. Love is patient, kind, rejoices with truth, protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres, and never fails. Love is not envious, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, recording wrongs, or delighting in evil.

This kind of love must be lived out every day in family relationships and in social interaction with a variety of neighbors. This kind of love is never

easy, but comes only from “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). It is a little easier in one’s own culture where one knows the cultural rules for loving others; it is much more difficult in another culture where the customs are different. Indeed, several aspects of love are confusing and often misunderstood.

### **1. Love as a universal and as a detailed teaching**

Actually, there are two kinds of commandments to love others in Scripture: the universal and the detailed. People need both. We dare not delude ourselves that we could somehow simply live in love and ignore the other specific teachings found throughout both Testaments (but especially the New). God knew humans needed them, which is why they are included. We humans live in a complex and often perplexing world; we do not know the right way to love others without the guidance of the many teachings and examples of Scripture.

At the same time, we often do not know how to rightly interpret these detailed teachings, so the principle of love sheds much light on what we should do. When the applications of two commandments seem to conflict, or when two cultures come together so that it is hard to know which application fits, the love principle can show us the way.

### **2. Cultural variations on what is genuine Christian love**

When people in a given society hear the Bible say, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” they have an idea of what that love would look like; their culturally conditioned consciences tell them what they should do. The alternative wording, “do to others as you want others to do to you” is clarifying. It is intended to give one an idea of what another person might desire. Love asks, “What would I want the other person to do for me if I were in his situation?”

That rule provides only limited guidance in other ethnic groups, however. When a person attempts to show love

to a neighbor from a distinctly different culture, the “as yourself” seldom communicates love. For example, if my wife serves a meal featuring pork to most Americans, they would see her action as love. If she served that same meal of pork to a Jew or a Muslim or a vegetarian, it would be very offensive.

We thought we were showing love to Bahinemos by taking them the twenty miles by boat to the hospital. Although several lives were saved, the hospital seemed like prison to them, especially because of their belief about death. They believed that if a person died so far away from home, the ghost would not be able to find its way back for the important burial procedures, causing catastrophic problems for the whole extended family.

Actions one person sees as loving in a given culture may actually cause harm to a neighbor within another culture. Certain actions can even cause them to stumble and lose faith. It takes research before one can know what local people in another culture would want one to do to show love in that setting. It often takes 1 Corinthians 13 love, which is patient and kind, but not proud, rude, self-seeking or easily angered.

That said, there are Scripture-based limits on how far one can go in adapting one’s behavior. We Christians cannot just do what we think is loving and ignore scriptural teaching. Instead, we must love others in ways that both communicate love and still result in obedience to all the biblical commands. The imperative to love others shows us how to apply the commands: it does not replace them.

### *Using the Interpretation Steps: Two Biblical Examples*

#### **Foot Washing**

Before the Last Supper, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and said,

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you should also wash one another’s feet. I have set

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you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (John 13:14–15)

Few present day churches obey this literally. Even those churches that practice foot washing actually do so under very special circumstances and only as a symbolic act. There is a sensible reason; foot washing as originally commanded would accomplish little in a culture where people wear shoes and socks, walk on pavement, and take frequent showers.

Does this mean the command should be ignored? Of course not! The first principle of interpretation is that all Scripture is for our benefit and is to be obeyed. There is a clear and widely accepted meaning for today, a meaning that becomes obvious when following the procedure.

Let us go through the three application steps.

#### *Step 1: What did this say to them?*

Wash each other’s feet. The context of this command was a dusty city without elaborate water and sanitation systems, with many animals in the streets, and people walking barefoot or in sandals. Even if one took a bath before visiting a friend’s home, by the time he arrived his feet were dirty again. Therefore, a good host assigned a servant to wash his guest’s feet before he could comfortably recline to eat (Luke 7:44). It was this lowly, dirty, but practical task that Jesus taught the disciples to do for one another. This is the meaning to the original set of readers and hearers.

#### *Step 2: What does this mean?*

The Biblical absolute might be stated like this, “No matter how important your role in the Christian community, always be willing to do the lowliest, most disagreeable tasks to benefit a fellow believer or fellow human.”

#### *Step 3: What does it mean to me?*

The modern world certainly offers plenty of room for humble, loving service. (This is where the fourth interpretation principle fits.) There are a myriad of applications to this command. Sick and dying people, including AIDS victims, need care. Prisoners can be visited and crime victims assisted. Everyday services of cooking, cleaning, caring for babies and the elderly need attention. The list goes on. A church can only keep going because there are ushers, janitors, nursery workers, as well as preachers and teachers. Christians who do their share of these lowly tasks are fulfilling the command whether or not they also take part in the symbolic ritual of foot washing.

#### **Muzzling the Ox**

The Apostle Paul interpreted Old Testament passages this way in 1 Corinthians 9:9–10 and 1 Timothy 5:17–18. He was arguing that Christian workers deserved to be paid, and he proved his point by quoting a command in Deuteronomy 25:4, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.”

How did Paul make this strange jump from oxen to people? Follow the Application Steps. (Step 1: What does it say?) “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” In the 1 Corinthians passage he went on to ask, “Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he?” The answer to his question is no, not in the original passage. The intended meaning for the original hearers really was about the fair treatment of animals.

But Paul saw the core meaning (Step 2: What does it mean?) The core of that passage is that one who labors deserves some income for his work. (Step 3: What does it mean to me?) That concept has many applications.

He applied it to mean that people in Christian communities should pay their pastors. Furthermore, since people are more important than animals, Paul argued that this was the most important purpose of the command. Jesus also said people were the object of the passages about oxen in the Old Testament (Luke 13:15; 14:5).

This is not an obvious application of a passage on treatment of oxen, but Jesus and Paul followed the application steps for us.

### *Some Less Obvious Examples*

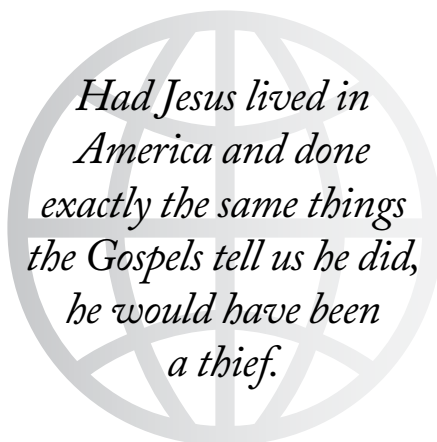
Sometimes these four interpretation principles are easy to apply. Christians today sense that they should help with the clean up and do some dirty jobs for other Christians without realizing they are “foot washing.” At other times, the process is difficult. In some cases problems arise from omitting one of the three steps to discover the core meaning. In other cases, a group of Christians feel that a particular application is very obvious. When that happens, the principle and its application become coalesced in their minds, so that the application becomes the meaning. In other words, these Christians have confused a particular cultural application with a true Biblical absolute. As a result they preclude a different application when the situation changes.

Some biblical commands are worded as universals, so the second step is unnecessary. “You shall not steal,” for instance, was a specific command to ancient Israelites, but also a universal command for all people everywhere. New Testament commands such as “be hospitable” or “be kind” were given to particular people, but the wording is already universal. Kindness, hospitality, and theft are all understood in cultures everywhere. Such universal wording leads Christians to the fallacy that the application is also clear and universal when in fact it is affected by culture. We can see this by examining how

some commands were obeyed in the New Testament, including the following example from Jesus’ life.

### **When Is It Stealing?**

Let us look at theft, using the Three Step Application Process. (Step 1): What did this say to them? “You shall not steal.” Because it is universally worded, the universal principle is the same as the original statement, “do not take what you do not have the right to take.” Steps one and two are therefore the same. The applications, however, vary with the culture. Had Jesus lived in America and done exactly the same things the Gospels tell us he did, he



would have been a thief. He used to walk through orchards that belonged to other people and eat the fruit, and even the Pharisees did not complain.<sup>8</sup> Yet if I go through an American orchard and pick the fruit I can be arrested for theft. If I defend myself in court by saying Jesus did it, I might get my name in the paper, but I won’t be let off.

The difference is in the application. (Step 3): What does it mean to me? Jesus lived in a culture that, through the Pentateuch, had defined public rights as including picking fruit, as long as it was eaten on the spot. Since his government gave Jesus the right to take the fruit, he was not stealing. My culture does not give a person the right to eat fruit from someone else’s

orchard. I would have to ask permission to take the fruit, or it would be stealing.

Some careful research may need to go into understanding what people in a particular culture have the right to take. Many people groups in Irian Jaya have very different rules about what a person has a right to take. *The Pineapple Story* (Gothard and Koning 1978) describes cross-cultural conflict as a result of different rules about the ownership of crops. If the missionary had asked, “Who has the right to take the pineapples?” and believed what he was told, he would have avoided years of misunderstanding that undermined his witness. The Irianese in his story had a clear rule, “The person who plants them eats them.” Garden produce is then used generously to build obligation for future leadership. Owners may put a curse on their garden to protect it from thieves by calling on a higher power, usually an ancestor. The people of that community had no experience or understanding of wage labor. The missionary assumed the protocol of wage labor, “If I pay for the labor, I own whatever is produced by that labor.”

### **Cultural Definitions of Hospitality**

The command to “practice hospitality” (Romans 12:13) is understood everywhere, yet not in the same way. When my daughter and I visited the Tboli people of Mindanao, Philippines in 1974, the Christians provided us with gifts and hospitality which added up to a month’s wages. Their culture sets a very high standard of hospitality, and this is the level of kindness they felt they should show to friends of their beloved translator.

As missionaries we are often the recipient of Christian hospitality in the United States. Many people have opened their homes and shown great kindness to us, though we were strangers. No one, however, has come close to giving us a month’s wages in hospitality. We don’t expect such a thing in North American culture. The universal



command must have a culturally appropriate expression.

### Cultural Standards of Generosity

The biblical command (Step 1) says to “be generous and willing to share” (1 Timothy 6:18). The core meaning is clearly the same (Step 2). But the application is very different for an Isneg villager in the northern Philippines than it is for us (Step 3). If an Isneg came into his village with a basket of pineapples from his garden, and gave away two-thirds of them, he would be considered stingy. The cultural standard is to give away three-quarters. If I returned from the grocery store and gave away two-thirds of my groceries to my neighbors, they would also be concerned—about my sanity.

We live in different cultures, with different standards and systems for sharing. The command is universal, but the application is culture specific. It is best to consistently use the three application steps and teach people in other cultures to do so.

### Holy Kisses

Another example of contextualized obedience is the way various cultures follow the instructions to (Step 1) “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26, 1 Peter 5:14). (Step 2) Greet one another in a warm, loving upright way. When people of different cultures follow through (Step 3), some cultures actually kiss. Others substitute an embrace, a warm handshake, mutual bowing, or even just a friendly voice and a smile. However it is done, love, respect, and affection are communicated in a wholesome way.

### Care for the Elderly—the Western Way

Take another example, the command to “honor your father and your mother” (Steps 1 and 2). The early church clearly saw that honoring one’s parents included taking care of them when they were old. The church cared for old people who had no children to care

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for them. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for worming their way out of parental obligation by giving to God what should have gone to parents (Matthew 15:1-9). I once heard a Fijian Senator publicly say that Western societies are “primitive” because we typically leave much of the care of the elderly to public agencies. In her view, old people should be cared for by their families, and should live with them. Certainly her approach is closer to what was done by the early church.

We American Christians, including most elderly ones, see the issue differently (Step 3: What does it mean to me?). We see the core meaning as essentially unchanged, but say that by fostering public policies that do provide for social security and community services, we are in fact fulfilling our obligation. As many Americans perceive things, our homes have no room for an extra family member, nor do older people want to be dependent on their families. Only when other arrangements are inadequate do we expect families to take in elderly parents. This is an example of obedience that fits the cultural context of some people in the United States.

### Should a Christian Smoke?

In the above examples, a tribal culture has held to a stronger realization of a commandment than Americans. Lest we conclude that the issue is simply an American lack of spirituality, here is a different example. Like many American evangelicals, my wife and I do not smoke. We have taken the command in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 to mean that we should care for our bodies. We know that smoking increases the risk of disease. These days many Americans agree with this, to the point they are willing to make life difficult for smokers in order to get cigarette smoke completely out of offices and public places.

The Bahinemo Christians with whom we spent many years in Papua New Guinea were eager to obey God and his commands. We taught them to go to God’s Word rather than to us for the answers to their life questions. We would only be there a limited number of years and wanted them to depend on Jesus for help. Much to our embarrassment among missionary co-workers, they saw no command against smoking in the Bible and had no conviction that it was a sin. This was in a context of God clearly convicting them of other sins in their lifestyle.

Bahinemos knew that the Bible commands us to care for our bodies, but they saw no relationship between smoking and disease. The concept of a slow incremental cause and the statistical concept of risk are totally foreign to their worldview. Unless we could show them a cause and effect relationship, they were not ready to accept our idea that the strange lung diseases and coughs they had were the result of smoking. Furthermore, locally grown tobacco provides one of their few pleasures in a world full of insects and discomfort. It is also one of the few ways they can afford to provide hospitality to visitors, a very high value. Only a few who were very ill from lung diseases quit smoking for medical reasons, despite my efforts to teach on this point.<sup>9</sup>

During the early years of the church we could simply have told them, “You cannot smoke and be a Christian.” After all, we were their initial evangelists and the source of all they knew about these new teachings. To do so would not have tied the teaching to Scripture, however. It would have convinced them that there are some things for which you do not go to Scripture at all. The result would have been a lessened willingness to submit to God’s Word as the primary source for knowing his will. It might easily have

increased their susceptibility to every self-styled “prophet” who came along.

### Conclusion and Summary

This article has attempted to explain why it is appropriate for Christians to interpret and apply biblical teachings in order to make them more appropriate to their own cultures. Down through the centuries, believers have naturally made such applications without realizing it. Indeed, their perceptions of what Scripture was asking of them were so molded by their own cultures that the principles and their cultural applications were intertwined. The Epistles in particular teach us that a Christian community should come to its own understanding of how the Bible should be applied. Even if believers in every society were fully mature, there would still be differences in how they obey the Bible.

We presented four principles for determining how a command applies.

1. All of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, is authoritative over all people, in every age and culture.
2. There is an original set of readers and hearers to which every passage was addressed.
3. The core meaning, of every command of Scripture is applicable in all cultures; this is the true biblical absolute.
4. The command to love others as you love yourself states the purpose of the other commandments, and thus provides a way to sort out cases of cultural and other conflicts in interpretation.

A Three-Step Application Process helps one find the core meaning and how it applies in any particular situation.

Step 1. What did this say to them? (Original meaning)

Step 2. What does it mean? (Core meaning)

Step 3. What does it mean to me? (Personal meaning or to my friends in another culture)

These Four Application Principles and the Three-Step Application Process reveal the core meaning of a command. **IJFM**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> It wasn't that I thought I was succeeding in living righteously, but I thought if I were to succeed it would be by truly doing what I had been taught was right living for everyone.

<sup>2</sup> All Biblical references in this article are noted from the New International Version.

<sup>3</sup> Indians and Africans often insisted that she wear a head covering in church after we let them know we wanted to do what is right.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Other Side*, Nov-Dec. 1975 for these and other examples.

<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless mature Christians were being asked to give up that freedom for the sake of some new believers.

<sup>6</sup> For a more thorough discussion of this concept and its hidden complexities, see Geisler 1989. The approach I am taking could be seen as a variant of “Graded Absolutism” (Geisler, 113-132).

<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, if it is written to us, and conflicts with something our culture approves of or values, we will have a difficult time seeing the real meaning of that command and applying it.

<sup>8</sup> Jesus was breaking the law only if he did it on the Sabbath. (Mark 11:12-33). At his trial the Pharisees did not raise this as a problem.

<sup>9</sup> Recently increasing numbers of the people of this village have come to realize the relationship between smoking and health, with the result that many have stopped smoking.

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