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Social Customs Versus Biblical Law

by Ernest L. Martin, Ph.D., July 1996

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Read the accompanying [Newsletter for November 2012](#)



At the very beginning let us understand one essential fact that all who take the teachings of the Bible seriously will recognize. It is the principle that any biblical law, given by God to govern a person's conduct in religious or social affairs, is much more important than customs devised by mankind, even if those customs are based upon what people call "biblical principles." This is because biblical law is strictly definitive for those to whom the laws apply. Any social custom or system must be in strict accordance with those biblical laws.

This fundamental teaching is defined very precisely by Christ Himself. He said in Luke 4:4 that people ought to obey every word of God. In answer to the devil when He was tempted by him:

"And Jesus answered him, saying, 'It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.'"

• **Luke 4:4 (and Matthew 4:4)**

Jesus' answer is very precise and to the point. Christ meant what He said. Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 8:3.¹ Of course, the laws which are applicable to you are the ones that He was talking about. There may be laws (and there are many laws in Scripture) which do not apply to you at all. In that case, it is not necessary for you to apply and obey those laws. This is made clear in Scripture. I will get to that shortly.

The Apostle Paul

Paul told the Christians in the city of Corinth in Greece that all the teachings he gave to them — all of them, it makes no difference what they were (even the suggestions he gave them) — in regard to proper conduct in their lives and the *ekklesia* in which they belonged, these teachings of the apostle Paul were to be reckoned as the very "**commandments of the Lord**" (1 Corinthians 14:37).

¹ In Deuteronomy 8:3 Moses told the people of Israel what YHWH had done:

"And he humbled you, and suffered [allowed] you to hunger, and fed you with manna, which you knew not, neither did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of YHWH does man live."

So the apostle Paul demanded that people who listen to him, who were going to adhere to his teachings, who wanted to express their righteousness in a proper way and be in conformity to basic principles which all people who adhere to God's revelation want to do, they should look on the Paul's teachings to those Corinthians as representing the commandments of God. This is an important statement to make because commandments are quite different than ordinances. Statutes and ordinances are not as strongly ordered or shown in Scripture as commandments. We must understand this point.

Paul said the teachings he was giving to the Corinthians, teachings which would reach out to apply to all of the *ekklesias* wherever Paul was, those teachings to them represented the very commandments of God. They were not just the teachings of Paul, but of God. This brings us back to what Jesus Himself said, that we should obey **"every word of God."** This means we are to obey those words of God which pertain to us.

Paul to Timothy

This is what I wanted to give you at the very beginning, an overriding principle which must be kept in mind when we come to the question of laws pertaining to you and me, biblical commandments that are supposed to be kept by us. Our obedience must agree with this overriding principle which the apostle Paul gave just before his death. This last epistle of Second Timothy was his final instruction to the *ekklesia*. This instruction was to be in force until the Second Advent of Christ.

He did a great deal of summing up in his last epistle, and one principle teaching Paul gave you, I will give now. It is a teaching which is most important for us to consider on the topic of any law, commandment, or social custom:

"Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

• **2 Timothy 2:15**

"The word of truth," is the biblical revelation. Paul was one of the men, along with Peter and John, who left the New Testament to us, which was attached to the Old Testament. The Old and New Testaments together represent, in the proper order and number, 49 books. There are 27 books to the New Testament and there are 22 books to the Old Testament. Put together you have the Holy Scriptures that represent the complete Word of God.

The Word of God is written variously to many people, individuals and entire nations. It is written particularly to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, and to the *ekklesia* (the assembly of believers), generally speaking, in the New Testament. There are also commandments in the Bible that refer to particular individuals and not to nations as a whole.

This is only common sense. But common sense represents one thing, and the divine word and teaching from the apostle Paul represent quite another. This is why the apostle Paul wanted to make clear that this common sense teaching would have the authority of divine teaching of God behind it. So he said we should keep **"the word of truth,"** but in keeping the word of truth, we must rightly divide it.

The word translated in English as "rightly dividing" in Greek means to "partition." Not only should we partition it, but Paul attached an adjective "rightly" or "correctly" to the Greek word "partition" or "dividing." The composite word thus means to divide **"the word of truth"** in a way compatible to the overall teachings of God, and particularly those teachings which pertain to you, to me, and to us who live as Christians at the beginning of the 21st century.² Paul was writing to Timothy at the middle part of the 1st century AD. Yet, his admonition applied then just as well as it does now.

This principle applies at all times, in any given circumstance. It is a principle for us to keep in mind all the time, because without this principle, we will find the commandments of God are quite contradictory to one another. If you try to make a systematic appraisal, or application of the teachings of the Bible, from the

² I updated Dr. Martin's original 1996 reference to 2012, early in the second decade of the 21st century. DWS

beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, as applying to everyone who lives on Earth at the present time, it just will not work. It is not meant to work that way. There are specific commandments and teachings and social customs which were given to govern particular people at particular times.

Later on, many social customs were supplanted by newer and different customs. In the time of Moses when the Exodus took place, we find all types of laws and regulations that were given by God to Moses, to Aaron, and others, which differed tremendously from those previously given to Abraham, going on back to Noah, and even going all the way back to Adam.³

New Laws in the New Testament

When the New Testament came along, we find there were extra teachings given there also, teachings based upon the Old Testament, but in many cases they were amplifications of those laws, spiritualizing those laws in many cases. Things important in the Old Testament, and important for Israel, become unimportant for the Christian *ekklesia* of the New Testament. This was because many of those sacrifices, the animals, and offerings made in the temple were types to show forth what the Christ (the Messiah) would do when He would be here on Earth.⁴

When He fulfilled the teachings of the animal sacrifices which the symbolism demanded, they no longer were effectual or needed, as far as the sacrifices themselves were concerned. Christ Jesus Himself duplicates, or takes over, many of the roles and symbols of the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament. The animal sacrifices go by the wayside, and Christ Jesus is put in front of them for all of us. We have spiritual teachings He has given us which we must apply. Those are written by the apostles in the New Testament.

In his last epistle to Timothy the apostle Paul was giving instruction which was part of Holy Scripture. It was one of the last things he ever wrote to Timothy (that we have a record), and one of the last things he says to you and to me. He wanted us to understand the principle that we are to keep **“the word of truth,”** which was as Jesus said, **“every word of God.”** Then we must add what the apostle Paul said, that his words were **“the commandments of God”** (1 Corinthians 14:37).

They all must be taken into the concept of applicability, in other words, who they apply to at any given time. This is why we find Paul saying we should **“study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing [partitioning] the word of truth.”** We must know which part of Scripture refers to us, and what part of the Scripture does not refer to us.

Old Testament Laws

Let me give some examples. In the period of the Exodus when the animal sacrifices were established for the Tabernacle and later in the Temple, the priests had to be available for service.

- To go into the Temple of God, you had to be an Israelite.
- If you were a male, you had to be circumcised. If you were not circumcised, you could not go in. You could not sacrifice.
- If you were an Israelite male you could go only into the section which pertained to you as an ordinary Israelite. You could not go inside the priestly area, which was ordained only for them.

³ For an expanded discussion of the limitations and inherent contradictions of the commandments and God’s later changes to His Covenant with Israel, see Dr. Martin’s article [“The Ten Commandments.”](#) DWS

⁴ See Dr. Martin’s excellent article [“The Book of Hebrews”](#) which details many of these points and gives an excellent background to this important New Testament book. See also my Commentary [“The Book of Hebrews”](#) introducing Dr. Martin’s presentation. The sermon of Hebrews explains the purposes of the symbols contained in the Levitical and priestly practices and rituals. DWS

- The priests themselves could go in their priestly section but only to perform their functions at the proper time for them to do so.
- Into the inner sanctum of the Temple, called the Holy of Holies only the High Priest could enter, and only at one time of the year, on the Day of Atonement known as Yom Kippur.

So you see, all of these restrictions were in there, and we have got to rightly apply them. No Israelite could just barge into any area of the Temple, and go right into the priestly area or into the Holy of Holies anytime he pleased. The Bible commanded that those sections be cordoned off. They were only for certain authorities, and the laws which applied to those authorities as given in Scripture do not apply to you at all.

The entire Book of Leviticus is about what the priests and the Levites are to be doing in the Tabernacle and the later Temple, with the sacrificial and ritual services they performed for all the people of Israel.⁵ All of those Scriptures, and there is a large body of them, do not even pertain to the ancient Israelites generally speaking, but they pertain only to the priests, and to the Levites. Other sections apply only to the High Priest, and only at particular times of the year when he would be required to perform certain ritual acts.

Teachings for the Ekklesia

When you come to the New Testament you find some of the teachings of the apostle Paul also fit into the same category of special applicability. He mentions having certain types of services in the *ekklesia*, in the assembly. He said that some people can do certain things, and other persons cannot, which does not mean any person is inferior to anyone else in the *ekklesia*. Rather, just as in the Old Testament example that only certain people can go into the Temple to perform their duties at proper times, the same thing applies in New Testament times in the *ekklesias*.

You should not be upset about that at all because there are certain administrative offices which God has arranged to show how His Kingdom and His family operate in heaven and throughout the universe. He wants us to understand the principles of order, and organization, and of administration, and procedure, which keep creation operating harmoniously. This is because God's family — and we are part of that family — is a social community. It is a social group, and any time you have a social group, it simply means that you must have regulations which will pertain to what is done and when it will be done.

There are certain activities, as man and woman, which require privacy. When God had the Temple set up in Jerusalem it had various compartments to show that people could come to Him only at certain times. He wanted privacy, and He demanded privacy. He wants you to have privacy also. God has laws in the Old Testament, and they are also reflected in the New, which says one family should respect the property of another. You also should respect the privacy of others. A husband and wife can have certain intimacies which others cannot have. Children are to be in a particular situation where they do not act like adults. This is for their own good later when they will be adults.

There are Scriptures which pertain to children and other Scriptures which pertain to adults. This is why Jesus and the apostle Paul very properly said that the Word of God should be kept by us all. But since we are social creatures we have to learn how to get along with one another. We need to learn how to get along with God, and among ourselves. So he says we should study, study the Word of God **“... to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”** (2 Timothy 2:15). This is the overriding principle which must be taken into account when you think about biblical laws.

⁵ The Levites were one of the 12 tribes of Israel. Within the tribe, the clan or family of Aaron was chosen by God to officiate and serve as priests of God to the people of Israel in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple in Jerusalem. In turn, the entire nation of Israel was intended by God to serve a priestly function to the nations (Exodus 19:6 and Isaiah 61:6). See Dr. Martin's presentation, [“The Sacrificial System of Israel”](#) which explains the basic rituals of the Law of Moses. Large sections of the New Testament relate to those ritual acts, how they were prophetic and fulfilled in the life, acts, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For example, Jesus was our Passover prefigured in the Mosaic Law (1 Corinthians 5:7). See note 4 above. DWS

Changes in Social Customs

Remember the title of this lecture? I now want to discuss those social customs which are primarily for us today. We can read about the social customs of the ancient times. Many of those do not apply to us today. I would guess you are quite aware of them. Let me refer to some of those things. In the Old Testament it was quite proper for a man to have more than one wife. We in the Western world do not apply that custom any longer, and rightly so from my point of view.

There are all types of laws and regulations mentioned in the Bible, and reflected even in the New Testament which have to do with social customs which govern things no longer applicable to us, except in principle. But you must be careful, because sometimes those who say they apply such things “in principle” really want to apply them precisely and definitively, just as they were applied in the Old Testament, and that is not how such matters should be judged.

Can you tell me how in the world you apply the teaching that the High Priest can go into the Holy of Holies only on the Day of Atonement, with any type of a service in a Christian *ekklesia* today? With the exception that someone has to be in charge, this is the only meaning you can get out of it. If you go by the details of what the High Priest was to do, his actions within the rituals he performed do not apply at all for the Christian community.⁶ Do you see the point? The actions of the High Priest and the *ekklesia* are two different things altogether. This is why we must understand there are principles that should govern all of these things, and the Bible has examples how customs have changed over the years. Our customs today are quite different than they were in Old Testament times or in New Testament times.

Our customs today at the beginning of the 21st century are different than the customs a hundred years ago in 1896. At that time there were only a few automobiles. There were hardly any paved roads. There were no signs saying “65 miles per hour” on the freeway, because there were no freeways. They had trains, and horse drawn vehicles. They did not have the things which we have today. There was no television. There was no radio. There was no space exploration going on then.⁷

Customs applicable more than 100 years ago are very different than today. In order to have even proper manners, you were to keep your horse you were using in a particular place so it would not foul the street in public places. You see what I mean? Most people today do not even know how to handle a horse in an urban area. So, our customs change and we are very well aware of such things.

God has allowed the principles of the Scripture to be taken into account so that customs each of us live with can be accounted for. We can then live by those principles of Scripture to help us distinguish proper and improper customs without any difficulty at all.

Principles of Social Customs

First, the overall principle which I have given above is applicable. It is to rightly divide the word of truth, once we know the truth.

Second, there is another spiritual principle which, if you understand it as given by the apostle Paul, will apply to any era. Going back to Adam and Eve coming to the time of Noah; up to the time of Abraham, customs which were very different then; coming into the Exodus period, again customs were greatly different; coming even into the New Testament period, and even up to today, this principle applies. The apostle Paul gave us this principle in First Corinthians. Remember what Paul said:

“If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”

• 1 Corinthians 14:37

This second overall principle begins in 1 Corinthians 10:23 and continues to the end of the chapter and

⁶ Christ fulfilled the symbolism of the Temple rituals. DWS

⁷ And note the differences in society from 1996 when Dr. Martin presented this lecture to this year of 2012! DWS

includes the first verse of First Corinthians chapter 11.⁸ Read the entire passage. There we find how to apply basic customs of people in our midst created by generations before us.

Every culture has social customs it has developed over time. We find ourselves living in all kinds of customs. We did not create them. We are immersed in them through everyday living. If you want to change them, it is all right to do so as long as the principles of Scripture are adhered to in our lives.

Third, 1 Corinthians 10:23–33 always applies. Paul gave it to the Corinthians because they were having severely disruptive problems with social customs, specifically, how to adapt the customs of the Jewish *ekklesia* together with those of the Gentile *ekklesia*. The situation Paul describes at Corinth was a clashing of cultures. How in the world can you blend one culture and its customs with another?

The apostle Paul saw the difficulty, and so, under inspiration of God, he gave this overall explanation. He later labeled these as **“commandments of God.”** It deals with customs. Here it is:

**“All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient:
all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.”**

• **1 Corinthians 10:23**

You must properly understand the context in which Paul made this statement. He was talking about righteous living. He was talking about living as a Christian in a Gentile society, in Corinth, Greece, which was basically and highly idolatrous, and was not a city which lived by the principles of the Scriptures that the Jews principally went by. Do you understand what I mean?

Paul had to give instructions to these formerly pagan Corinthians on how they could apply certain principles. He was saying this: “as matters of customs are concerned, all things are allowed to me.” He made it definitive. **“All things are lawful for me,”** the apostle Paul said, in matters of custom, **“... but all things are not expedient.”** So, what does he mean by that?

Going on: **“... all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.”** They do not edify me, and they do not edify the other person, yet they are lawful, the apostle Paul says. Now, what are these **“things”**? He said: **“Let no man seek his own** [that is, his own way of doing things], **but every man another’s *WEALTH*”** (1 Corinthians 10:24).

The word “wealth” is an italicized word.⁹ In the King James period “wealth” simply meant “conduct,” or “welfare.” Paul meant you ought to be thinking about other people’s welfare as well as your own, but not exclusively your own. Think about the other person. That is what he is saying. Do not think about your own selfish ways of doing things, think about the feelings of the other person. Can you do this, he says? He says you should.

Later he says I can do anything I wish, as long as I do it **“to the glory of God.”** If I do it to please Christ, then I am following Christ and I can do anything I please. But he says, think not just about your own way of doing things, think about the feelings of the other person in whatever you do. This is what he means in verse 24. Then he gives a specific example:

“Whatever is sold in the shambles [the meat markets in Corinth], **that eat** [you can go ahead and eat the meat], **asking no questions for conscience sake.”**

• **1 Corinthians 10:25**

The members of the Corinthian *ekklesia* wondered whether or not they should eat the meat in the shambles. The laws of the Old Testament said unclean foods should not be eaten. In fact, not only should unclean food not be eaten, but if any utensil came in contact with, let us say, pork, or an animal which was unclean like an octopus, or rabbit, which was unclean, or a camel, or whatever, then even the utensils themselves were unclean. But the apostle Paul said that referred to Israel; it does not refer to you or me. He said these

⁸ In the King James Version they usually divide the chapter in the proper place. Chapter divisions in our translations were established in the 13th century AD. *DWS*

⁹ This indicates it is inserted into the English for clarity, but the word “wealth” is not in the Greek. *DWS*

judgments of his were **“the commandments of God”** (1 Corinthians 14:37).

If people want to accept the commandments of God from the apostle Paul, then there is no argument. If they do not accept the apostle Paul, you can have all the arguments you want. But there is no doubt what Paul is saying (with the Holy Spirit backing him): whatsoever is sold in the meat markets, you go right ahead and eat it, and do not have any conscience over those matters of clean and unclean, as far as ritualistic principles are concerned.

Obviously if the meat is spoiled, it is a physiological thing and has nothing to do with the spiritual side or with rituals. Paul is trying to show that you can make judgments based upon the society around you at present.

This principle the apostle Paul gave in 1 Corinthians 10:23–33 shows how we can apply the laws of God in any particular system of customs which you can find on earth. He was talking here, principally, to the Corinthian *ekklesia* who found themselves trying to apply biblical principles, mainly coming out of Palestine, within a pagan Gentile environment. There were clashes of society in the two *ekklesias* and the apostle Paul recognized that.

He said **“all things are lawful for me”** in social matters. He did not mean that you could go and kill, or steal, or any such thing. The context is all about customs that mankind has made, customs we which do within our cultures. He goes on to say in verse 31: Everything you, or I, or we, or the Corinthians were to do, or the apostle Paul was to do, should be done to the glory of God. This means you should not go out and do things which are wrong. As far as customs are concerned, and things are lawful, you can go ahead and do those customs. But Paul says you will sometimes upset certain people if you go your own way, even though what you do is lawful and even proper for you to do so. You should think about the other guy’s feelings.

The Corinthian Meat Markets and Feasts

So, Paul indicates here about this going to the shambles, the meat markets. He says go ahead and eat the meat which comes from there. No Jew would eat it. They will not, but Paul says it is perfectly all right **FOR YOU** to do so:

“For the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof. If any of them that believe not [those who are not Christians] bid you to a feast, and you be disposed to go [to any feast, and you want to go]; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake.”

• 1 Corinthians 10:26–27

This is what Paul said: **“eat.”** Again I will tell you, in a Jewish society, even in Corinth, they would not do that. But here is the apostle Paul saying (and he said his words are the commandments of God), he gave allowance for the Gentile Christians to **“eat.”** This is different from the Old Testament, is it not? Absolutely it is different. In Leviticus chapter 11, and in Deuteronomy, it says only certain meats could be eaten, and they had to be prepared in a particular way, under certain ritualistic laws and customs. If you went to Palestine, you would find yourself in a very different situation than you would find in Corinth (or today in New York, Los Angeles, London, Moscow, or Tokyo).

The apostle Paul said whatsoever is set before you, if you want to go to this feast, go ahead and eat. Now, if the meat were tainted in some way or rotten, you would not eat it. He is not talking about that. But when it comes to customs, and things of that nature, go ahead and participate. This is what he says.

Next look at verse 28: **“... if any man say unto you, This [this meat] is offered in sacrifice unto idols ...”** In other words, if the whole emphasis of the feast is idolatry, then here is what the apostle Paul says: **“eat not ...”** Why? For two reasons: **“eat not [1] for his sake that showed it, and [2] for conscience sake ...”** For whose conscience sake? **“Conscience, I say, not your own”** (1 Corinthians 10:29). If it does not make any difference, Paul told you to go ahead and eat it.

But for the sake of the conscience of the man who says, I want you to eat this because I have designed this for an idolatrous act, then if you do eat, you are participating with him in idolatry. This is when you put

a stop to it. This is not custom, this is religion. This is far different.

If you then go to the feast and there are certain customs, like prayer before, and it is all general, and you are having a good convivial time with the individual and idolatrous religious principles are not being acted out, Paul said — go ahead and do it.

He made it clear that the conscience is not your conscience, because you know the meat is just meat, whether it is for idolatrous reasons or not. The point is, if the situation is turned into a religious idolatrous act, then do not partake, because the man knows you are a Christian and you must stand up for your principles. Citing all of verse 29:

“Conscience, I say, not your own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged by another man’s conscience?”

• 1 Corinthians 10:29

Paul was at liberty to eat whatever he wanted in such a situation. But if there were restrictions put upon him by the host, and the host was an idolater who told Paul, “you are going to participate with me in this idolatrous act,” Paul, in order to teach him (the host), would say, “this was not the reason I came here.”

This should be made clear before you even accept the invitation, that idolatrous acts would not be on the agenda as the purpose of the activity. You see the point? If it was on the agenda, you have the right to say no for the sake of the conscience of the other person. But for you, there is no idolatrous act in eating a piece of meat of any kind, unless the implications of idolatry are placed upon it. So, you have to be careful. He says in verse 30:

“For if I by grace be a partaker [of these things], why am I evil spoken of for that which I give thanks? Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

• 1 Corinthians 10:30–31

Notice this last part. Not only in eating, and drinking, which have to do with customs, but **“whatsoever you do,”** in any circumstance, the end of verse 31 says it: **“... do all to the glory of God.”** There it is. You have to use wisdom. You must use judgment. You have got to know what to do, and what not to do.

A Personal Example

Take me as an example. In my position as a teacher, and as one who for 40 years has been trying to tell people to stay away from idolatrous things, I have to be particularly careful in what I do, or what I allow at particular times of the year. I do so to show there is a difference between how I live and the customs I do, different from those customs of people down the street. I take it upon myself to live this way, basically on the principles Paul is giving here. This is very important for us to understand. Paul continues:

“Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church [the *ekklesia*] of God.”

• 1 Corinthians 10:32

All peoples of the world have various customs. When I go to a particular person’s home, they may have prayer every time before a meal, and even after a meal. Yes, I have even had people say a prayer both before and after. There is no offense to me one way or another on this, because they are giving thanks to God in prayer. I will go right along and participate with them in it. The customs of the Gentiles, however, may be different. If they bring paganism into it, where they are making me to be a part of such acts, then I have a right to say no. If I just look on all of my actions, and the intent of your actions is to please and glorify God, in the manner of common sense and biblical teaching, then you will be all right:

“Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.”

• 1 Corinthians 10:33

“That they may come into a knowledge of a saving grace of God,” is what Paul is saying. Look at 1 Corinthians 11:1, because it belongs with the former section: **“Be you followers of me [the apostle Paul said], even as I also am of Christ.”** This ends it. Then Paul goes to another subject.

In other words, Paul was trying to follow Christ. And as he followed Christ, you Corinthians should follow Paul. He tried not to offend anyone in any situation on customs unless it involved major spiritual principles of idolatry, or something similar which, if he would observe them, would classify him as a heathen, or be classified as someone teaching one way and acting exactly the other way which God says not to do. This ought to be very plain.

Again I am giving principles here, but this principle applies at all times, and in any given situation which you come across of a social nature, whether you should do something or not do something, there is one thing you should always put into effect, according to the apostle Paul as he gave in verse 31 — **“do all to the glory of God.”**

Another Principle

Yet there is another principle you can always use, and it never fails. It is in Galatians chapter 5, dealing with the fruit of the Holy Spirit. If you will look at this Scripture, and always try to apply the principles there, you will be in good stead virtually all the time. What is the fruit of the Holy Spirit?¹⁰

“But the fruit of the Spirit [it means the Holy Spirit] **is love, joy, peace, longsuffering** [meaning patience], **gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such** [these nine virtues] **there is no law.”**

• *Galatians 5:22–23*

There is no law against any of those virtues of the fruit of the Spirit. What are we talking about here? Social customs versus biblical law. Biblical laws are one thing; social customs of men are another. You can do any of the social customs of men, as long as you are doing them to please God, but always within the bounds of the Holy Spirit. This is the bounds of **“love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.”** It means, as the apostle Paul said, if you are in a situation directly contrary to those basic principles which you hold in the highest esteem — for example, idolatry, then you are not to participate in idolatry.

In normal circumstance, you would be able to go ahead and have a feast with anyone, and if they have social customs which are different than yours, it is perfectly fine as long as they do not violate the principles of Scripture which pertain to you.

Yet customs and laws do change. We know this. Even in Scripture, what applies to one generation, does not apply to another. In fact, some things which earlier people did are actually offensive to later people. Or, put it another way, things which later people do, would be offensive to earlier people.

Custom Changes in the Bible, Some Examples

Take a look at the Book of Ruth back in the Old Testament.¹¹ In Ruth 4:7 we have an explanation about a custom which was done in Ruth’s day that, by the time the author of Ruth came along, whoever he was, things had changed drastically. No one in Israel knew what the older custom was. The author had to explain what the archaic custom was. This shows that even in the Scripture, which covers 4,000 years of history, changes took place. Those changes are understood and recognized by God. Look at this verse, which involves taking off a shoe in regard to marriage vows and nuptials:

“Now this was the manner in former time in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning

¹⁰ Note that in Greek the word “fruit” is a singular noun. It is not plural (fruits). DWS

¹¹ In our King James Version the Book of Ruth is attached to Judges. It should not be there, but this is the way we have it in our Bibles today. DWS

changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbor: and this was a testimony [or a witness] in Israel.”

• *Ruth 4:7*

This practice had the legal effect similar to you taking a legal oath in court. Yet the Bible says do not take any oath, does it not?¹² Isn't this interesting? Christ said let your yay be yay, and your nay be nay (Matthew 5:37). Yet in Isaiah 65:16 it says that people will be taking oaths in the millennium which will be similar or slightly different from the situation of Ruth 4:7. You see, times change depending upon circumstances. I cannot go into all details, and what applies to any particular circumstance, yet you must take such things into consideration. This is why Paul instructed Timothy (and all of us) to “study to show yourself approved” (2 Timothy 2:15). These examples are given in Scripture to show that things do change. One thing never changes, the fruit of the Holy Spirit. That never changes.

The principles Paul is giving in First Corinthians chapter 10, about meeting your neighbor, looking after his welfare, and looking after the wellbeing of the other person — such things never change either. The fact that you should always want to do God's will, to please Him, and to glorify Him, this also never changes.

But details often change, and here is an example in Ruth 4:7. They would take off a shoe in a public setting, and they would give the shoe to the person with whom they wish to come to an agreement with. Such action of a public exchange would be a witness that the agreement was now in force. To you and me this would be strange. You and I do not take off one shoe, and give it to someone in a court of law, or some similar situation. Furthermore, this practice was no longer done when the author wrote the Book of Ruth, but he went into the records to explain this account. This is in the Bible; it is inspired. He was trying to explain that in earlier times this was the way they did things in Israel.

Changes in Christ's Time

There are many things done in Old Testament times which are not applicable for Christians. For example, the prophet Elijah brought down fire out of heaven upon two groups of 50 soldiers sent to him from Ahaziah, King of Israel (the son of Ahab, read the account in Second Kings chapter 1). This is what Elijah did, and he had the authority to do it. But when the apostles wanted to do the same thing to a town which rejected their teaching, Jesus Himself forbade them and said they should not do it (Luke 9:51–56). It was not given to them to do it, yet it was given to Elijah to do it.

We have also the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1–11). The scribes and Pharisees caught her right in adultery. They brought her to Christ. It says in the Scripture (Leviticus 20:10) that she should be put to death.¹³ After all, she was caught in the very act, and there were several witnesses to the whole situation. Do you know what Christ did? He did not have the woman stoned at all. In fact, He should have advocated such an action according to the laws of the Old Testament. But Jesus said to her, no, go and sin no more.

Do you know what Jesus did? He stooped down and began to write something in the ground. We do not know what He wrote, but it is interesting that from the oldest man to the youngest, they all left. What it probably means is that He wrote down the women who the first man had been with, the second man, and the third man, and the fourth man, and the fifth man. He wrote it there on the ground, and they all saw it. They did not want to be stoned either. They left. Christ put a different emphasis upon the laws of the Old Testament. These are sacred laws, but they can be interpreted differently. Christ did exactly that.

The Ten Commandments

Look at the Ten Commandments. We hear today about Christian denominations which adhere to the commandments with a great deal of esteem — they keep the Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week.

¹² See Dr. Martin's presentation “[Biblical Vows and their Present Significance](#)” DWS

¹³ By the time of the New Testament the death sentence was to be carried out by stoning the guilty woman, the same punishment as sacrificing children to Moloch (Leviticus 20:2) and calling upon an evil spirit (Leviticus 20:27), and other offenses. DWS

They claim they can keep all the other commandments. They also say the commandments can never be changed. It is interesting, if you take every single commandment except the first (where it says you shall have no other gods besides me), you can take the other nine, and in the Scripture every one of those commandments has been changed somewhat, and some drastically, in later Scriptures.

One, as a matter of fact, was changed within minutes after Moses gave them, in one way of looking at it. The second commandment says there shall be no graven image made anywhere in the territory of Israel. You are not to have any depiction, or graven image, of anything in heaven above, in the earth here, or the sea below (Exodus 20:4). This is very clear in the Ten Commandments, is it not? Yet in Exodus chapters 25 and 26, we find instructions of how to make cherubim, which are heavenly creatures, and put their images on the curtains of the Temple, and also put their sculpted images in the Holy of Holies. You see, this commandment did not apply in the Holy of Holies, or in the Temple. It meant outside where they should not make them. Those people who try to say the Ten Commandments are for all time and cannot be changed, they do not even realize that two chapters later we find some restrictions being taken from even this definitive command.

The same second commandment says God will visit the iniquity of the fathers unto the children unto the fourth generation if they take his name in vain. Yet in Ezekiel 18:2–3, and also down in verses 19–23, what do we find God telling Ezekiel?¹⁴ God said, in old times I said the iniquity of the children shall go down to the fourth generation. I am changing that. No longer will I hold that as a law. I will not hold to that any longer. He changed the Ten Commandments.

The Seventh Commandment

Now consider the seventh commandment. You shall not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14). Why, when He said do not commit adultery, it meant exactly that. But you know, the social customs when God gave the commandment were quite different than later on, and they are also quite different than we have them today. Moses had two wives, and he never gave them up. Abraham had three wives. David, though he did commit adultery with Bathsheba, he had wives and concubines, and he did not commit adultery by having polygamous relationship, which was allowed by God at the time. We even find the High Priest took two girls, two women, and gave them to King Joash of Judah as his wives under the influence of the Holy Spirit (2 Chronicles 24:2–3), and God gave multiple wives to King David (2 Samuel 12:7–8).

Christ Himself, in the 25th chapter of the gospel of Matthew, gives a parable about Himself coming back and five virgins are ready, and five are not ready for the husband — Himself. It is a polygamous type of a situation He is talking about. Ernest Martin, do you agree with polygamy? I do not. At present in this society we live in, it does not work. But in the Old Testament, there were laws governing it.¹⁵

What should we do in this Western civilization we have? The apostle Paul says do not offend the Jew, do not offend the Gentile, do not offend people, if possible, even with things which are allowable. Now the apostle Paul said, in regard to polygamous relationships, that he would not permit a man to be a leader in an *ekklesia* if he had two wives. It had to be one wife living at one time.

¹⁴ The entire 18th chapter of Ezekiel deals with the death of the soul that sins. The change from the Law of Moses is found in Ezekiel 18:19–23:

“Yet say you, Why? does not the son bear the iniquity of the father? When the son has done that which is lawful and right, and has kept all my statutes, and has done them, he shall surely live. THE SOUL THAT SINS, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.

But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he has committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. All his transgressions that he has committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteousness that he has done he shall live. Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? Says the Lord YHWH, and not that he should return from his ways, and live?”

DWS

¹⁵ In the future after the day of the Lord’s wrath, there shall be a shortage of men in Israel. Isaiah 4:1 indicates there will be a seven to one ratio. This has not happened in the history of Judah and Jerusalem to the present time. This circumstance may well require polygamous marriage again for a period of time until the normal one-to-one ratio is restored, at least in Judah. DWS

He did not say that polygamous unions were wrong. How could he say such a thing when the law of God said it was permitted? But the point is, it is not expedient, not edifying. Even the Jews practiced polygamy at the time of Jesus and the apostles.¹⁶

How many women did God make for Adam? He made one. How many went into the ark, two by two, one male and one female. Each of Noah's sons had only one wife. It was allowed, this is quite true. But you know, it is not expedient for us. I say to people who want to have more than two wives, why do you not go to Saudi Arabia? You cannot drink there, either. It is not a custom which we today use, just like in the old days they would take off a shoe and give it for a witness. But things do change. We are told to give no offense to people. Jesus Christ said that *porneia*, which was a type of fornication, is a matter for which a divorce is allowed. But Christ does not say anything else. So, what does He mean by this? He meant it in the environment of His time, and you have got to understand it that way.

Changes in Modern Customs

Take my mother as an example. Until she died, she lived to be 92 years of age, and she would never buy a dress which would show her upper arms exposed, like a strapless gown. She would not. Why? I often asked her why. She said well, the custom we had when I was reared, we did not do such a thing, and I still cannot bring myself to do it.

She would tell me when I was born and she would go to church, the first thing when the preacher would begin to preach, I would start crying. I remember the story, a woman in front of her said, "Lula, give that boy something to eat." You know something? She would breast-feed me right there in the middle of the church, and feel nothing about it whatsoever. Now in our society today, which is rather promiscuous, most women will not do that, but my mother did, and yet she would not even show the upper parts of her arms. Rather amazing, when you get down to it.

Even on questions of what is promiscuous and what is not, things do change. But the principles of the fruit of the Holy Spirit never do. We know what love is. We know what joy is. We know what faith is. We know how to be decent, do we not? The apostle Paul says we ought to be applying these laws to the customs around us, which lead to decency, which lead to the glorification of God, which comes to the place of not taking our own ways, even in things which are allowed to us.

Anything that God allows, you could say, is allowed to me. This is true. I can eat anything I want to, if God allows it. Yet there are times when you should not do such a thing. If everyone is fasting around me, because there is a national emergency of some kind, and the president has asked for people to fast, like they did in the old days,¹⁷ it is perfectly proper for me to eat, if I want to, as far as God is concerned. But if I want to join into the society, I will do it to please them. This is what we find the apostle Paul saying.

On these matters of custom, this is the way it should be. In matters of violating the Scripture, the laws of God can always be governed by the fruit of the Holy Spirit. You just simply turn to Galatians 5:22–23, if you ever get into a situation whether you say "should I, or should I not?" If the fruit of the Holy Spirit is being developed in you by your decision, and it glorifies God, you can always know you are right. Social customs can be in agreement with biblical law if you put the proper spiritual principles into effect.

Ernest L. Martin, 1996

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¹⁶ Even the priests of the Dead Sea Scrolls actually said it was wrong for anyone to have more than two wives. *DWS*

¹⁷ For example, Abraham Lincoln set forth a "[Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day](#)" for March 30, 1863. *DWS*