

Digging Deeper Week 6

Kissing Christians

It is important to understand the customs of biblical times so that we do not find ourselves obeying the words of Scripture but missing the heart behind them. Understanding culture and context helps us determine biblical principles rather than follow external mandates. Consider these commands in both the Old and New Testaments:

“Do not wear clothing woven from two different kinds of thread.”
(Leviticus 19:19b)

“A woman must not put on men’s clothing, and a man must not wear women’s clothing.”
(Deuteronomy 22:5)

Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak.
(1 Corinthians 14:34a)

Isn’t it obvious that it’s disgraceful for a man to have long hair?
(1 Corinthians 11:14)

If you do not have a wife, do not seek to get married.
(1 Corinthians 7:27b)

After reading these instructions, we might ask ourselves,

- Are we sinning if we wear clothing made with both cotton and polyester?
- Are women sinning if they wear pants or talk during church?
- Are men sinning if they have long hair or seek a wife?
- Are we all sinning when we see someone from church and don’t kiss them?

I would argue that the answer to all of these questions is, “No, we aren’t sinning.” So, does this mean we pick and choose which verses in the Bible to obey and which ones don’t apply? Rather than blindly throw out instructions that seem outdated to us, we can seek to understand why the author wrote them. We can look for God’s heart behind the instruction for the original audience and lift up biblical principles. Then we can take those principles and apply them as best we can through the leading of the Holy Spirit in our modern contexts.

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Jesus encountered some who didn't want to wrestle with Scripture but just wanted to enforce it as written. They were called Pharisees. Jesus told them that they strained a gnat but swallowed a camel (Matthew 23:24). He meant that they were so careful with the details that they missed the bigger picture of God's love and mercy. We are in danger of missing it too if we aren't willing to ask questions and wrestle with verses that are tough to understand.

In the very last chapter of Romans we find a command that is given often in the New Testament to the church: "Greet each other with a sacred kiss" (Romans 16:16). Both Paul and Peter instructed holy kissing (see Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14). In Eastern culture this was normative even for those who didn't follow Christ. One source explains, "It involved the laying on of hands on each other's shoulders then a pulling together and the giving of a kiss, first on the right cheek and then on the left."¹ Though this greeting of a double kiss is still practiced in some parts of the world, it isn't regularly practiced where I live! And for this gal who isn't much of a hugger or physical touch kind of person, I must admit I'm glad.

I wonder why Paul and Peter went out of their way to remind the church of this greeting and even elevate it to "sacred" or "holy" status when shared between believers in Christ. While we can't be exactly sure why they included the command, we do know that many of the early churches had disagreements and difficulties when it came to interpersonal relationships.

Paul spent much time in his letter to the church in Rome attempting to help Jewish and Gentile Christians find unity in Christ. By reminding them to greet each other, he was asking them to love each other in the midst of their conflicts. I know when I've had relational strife with people in my local church, I want to avoid them at all costs. Paul is instructing the church in Rome to lean in close—even when it's not easy. Early church father John Chrysostom said, "This kiss mollifies and equalizes everyone, banishing grievances and jealousy. Paul not only directs them to kiss one another in this way, but he also sends them the kiss of greeting from all the churches."²

We don't have to go around kissing each other as followers of Christ, but we don't want to miss the principle here. When we eventually have a clash of opinions with other believers, we shouldn't pull away. Instead let us lean in with affection and greet each other warmly. Whether it's a handshake, hug, or even a friendly wave, we can remember the common ground we share in Christ. We can love and greet even those who have different theologies, personalities, hobbies, appearances, or any other difference we might encounter.

Notes

1. Ralph Gower. *The New Manners & Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 242-243.
2. Michael F. Bird, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 525.