

Customs and Commands – 1

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Christianity did not start in a vacuum but first took shape among people steeped in Jewish tradition and culture. These people had their own habits and customs which were not in conflict with the precepts of Christ. Thus they could continue these practices provided they were kept in their proper sphere.

But a practical difficulty arises: How does one tell the difference between a social custom and a kingdom ordinance? How may we distinguish between that which was merely incidental and what was intended to be a perpetual practice?

One guideline would be whether or not spiritual significance is attached to the practice in question. For example, the Passover meal was the cultural setting for the final supper with the disciples, but eternal meaning is attached to the emblems and they are to be taken in memorial “*until He comes*” (1 Cor 11:23-26).

Another helpful consideration, though one to be handled with care, is how the next generations of Christians understood the teaching. If a certain practice did not arise in the church until 300-400 years after the apostles, then it indicates that the contemporaries of the apostles and their disciples did not understand the command to be of eternal significance.

The Holy Kiss

Peter ends his first epistle with the instruction, “*Greet one another with a kiss of love*” (1 Pet 5:14). Paul likewise tells the Thessalonians, “*Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss*” (1 Th 5:26). Is this an eternal command? And if not, why is it not?

First, it is obvious that this act was a customary greeting before Christianity (Lk 7:44-45; 15:20; Mt 26:48-49). In fact, it is still a custom in European and Middle Eastern countries. The apostles make reference to the command in their closing comments of their epistles where greetings are traded (see also Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12). There is no spiritual significance attached to the practice anywhere in the NT.

The “eternal” emphasis seems to rest upon the *attitude* rather than the *mode* of greeting: any greeting, regardless of the cultural norm, must be **holy**. If a culture mandates a handshake of greeting, Christians must shake hands without deception, hypocrisy or lustful lingering. Neither should the custom be withheld in condescension, as might have happened when masters and slaves met in the same assembly.

A.T. Robertson notes on 1 Pet 5:14: “The abuse of this custom led to its confinement to men with men and women with women and to its final abandonment (Apos. Const., ii. 57, 12)” (*Word Pictures*, Vol. 6, p. 136). On a subjective level, it seems wholly inconsistent for God to mandate a practice which has obvious sexual overtones. It is not sensible for God to warn Christians to “flee fornication” (1 Cor 6:18) and then install as a permanent ordinance that which has the potential to inflame passions. While a holy kiss of friendship or greeting is not sinful, it is not a command with spiritual significance.