

QUESTION:

There is the law in Leviticus. Clearly we don't follow the entire law - things like avoiding certain foods, mixing foods at meals, mixing fabric types, etc. The best explanation I can find for that has to do with Peter's vision regarding unclean food prior to going to preach to Gentiles (the centurion) mixed with some of Paul's writings regarding sacrificed food and other actions where one needs to have regard for the weaker conscience of some within (or outside) the group of believers.

The first answer comes from William Griffin::

Here is my brief take on how Christians ought relate to the Torah.

There is a popular perception that Jesus came to deliver us from the evil Old Testament which was a poorly-conceived experiment by God. That could not be further from the truth. One can find throughout the NT that its writers frequently cite OT rules as being valid for Christians. (For example, 9 of the 10 Commandments are explicitly reiterated as being valid for Christians.)

I think it is helpful to divide these into three types, and while not all laws can neatly be put into one or another, most can:

1. **Religious (our relationship with God):** The NT affirms that we are to serve the one true God who revealed Himself to people and have a record of this recorded in OT Scripture. We are not to deal with the occult, idolatry, or other religions. Early Christians did not have to equate Zeus with Yahweh in order to witness. Thus the NT basically affirms this type of law, but makes it even stricter with the revelation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2. **Moral/Ethical (our relationship with people):** How we treat other people is likewise basically affirmed by the New Testament, although I would argue that many of these rules are stricter in the NT, not looser (cf. the Sermon on the Mount).

3. **Ceremonial (outward signs of religious devotion not included above):** This would include things like the expectation of animal sacrifice, the need to be circumcised to become part of the Covenant community, feast days, and dietary laws. All these are NOT affirmed by the NT, although one is free to carry out at least the last three (and Paul had sacrifice offered in the Temple in his behalf--after he became a Christian!). Christians do not have to be circumcised to be saved (Galatians; Romans; Acts 15). Jesus declared all foods clean. We do not have to keep the feast days (Col 2), although the Lord's Supper is really giving a different significance to the Passover. Jesus' sacrifice takes care of the need for sacrifice.

How the NT views particular OT laws can be instructive. As noted under #3, ceremonial law is not affirmed. But when it comes to regulations and sexual immorality, Paul overtly affirms Levitical law in Romans 1-2; 1 Cor 5-6; and 1 Tim 1. In fact, Romans 1 makes explicit some of what is assumed in the OT (i.e., the prohibition of lesbianism; see our study).

When one considers the question about whether or not something is cross-cultural one can see how the Bible addresses many issues. For instance, if God held the ancient Canaanites accountable for something, told the Israelites not to do it, and it is affirmed in the NT, we already have at least 3 cultures addressed, if not 4. When it comes to the homosexuality issue, add the fact that the NT (Romans) argues that the pagans who lacked God's revelation were held accountable, and it is quite difficult to make the case that Biblical regulations on the topic do not apply today.

William P. Griffin, Ph.D.

The second answer comes from Wave Nunnally:

The Bible is not nearly as convoluted or difficult to interpret and apply as many would have you think. We don't have to do a lot of hermeneutical gymnastics, pull punches with original languages, or become engrossed in discussions of Akkadian loan-words, the Hebrew construct state, or the Greek aorist passive of the middle voice. Most of the discussion deals with CONTEXT—that which governs our interpretation of ALL forms of communication, and at which we are quite good as humans because we have been doing it so often for so long.

That said, I'd like to dig at one thing you raised because I find it the most difficult thing for most Christians when dealing with the Bible. What I'm referring to is that aspect of mosaic legislation that, as you said, "we don't follow the entire law - things like avoiding certain foods, mixing foods at meals, mixing fabric types, etc." Joseph Sprinkle, Roger Cotton, and numerous others have written specifically about these things, and I think they have moved the ball considerably in this area. These guys are saying something VERY important: this particularistic stuff has NOT ceased to function as the Word of God to us today—these things are all still in the Bible of every Jew and Christian to this day. They still bear the mark of divine inspiration, are still a part of that wonderful path to abundant life that God promises to those who obey Him, and are still relevant to us today. They have not been superceded; they are not irrelevant; and they have not "passed away"—they're STILL IN THERE! Starting with this premise, then—that the Word of God is the same and itself does not change (Isa. 40:8; 2 Tim. 3:16-17), the interpretative question must be "*In what way* do these unusual commandments still function as the word of God to me today? The writers above have observed that some of these laws have very specific application to the ancient Israel of the past. They are clearly external expressions of a unique people-group in a unique location surrounded by unique challenges in their day.

God cared so much about them that He lovingly surrounded them with reminders of Who they belonged to and how they were to differentiate themselves from the pagan cultures by which they were surrounded. God intentionally surrounded them with visual aids that accurately portrayed His nature, and consequently, what THEIR character should look like as His representatives on earth.

Because these pieces of legislation are SO closely connected to the contexts in which these ancient Israelites found themselves in, however, we're reminded by the authors referenced above that there will be some disjunction between our geographical, cultural, chronological contexts, so we have to allow for the EXTERNALS, the ETHNICALLY ASSOCIATED aspects, the outer HUSKS in which the ETERNAL TRUTHS are encapsulated to flex a bit in order that the eternal principles can still function as the eternal Word of God to 21st century Christians. Now for some examples: 1) in the Hebrew Bible we are told that priests are not go up to the altar by means of steps so as not to uncover their nakedness. A very literalistic reading of this, where no attempt to translate this cross-culturally would either disallow platforms ("stages", as they are now referred to in most churches) or require that they be ascended by ramps rather than stairs. Would either of these restrictions actually fulfill the INTENT of that law? No, because the purpose of the law was not to dictate architecture, but to preserve the modesty of priestly representatives of God at a time when they all wore ROBES that were open at the bottom. Consequently, this legislation should be applied today to God's representatives who should adorn and conduct themselves MODESTLY. 2) in Deut. 17, the various commands regarding the conduct of the Israelite king are given. Our problem is that we are not under a form of government that provides for a "king", though many who seek office here in the USA often posture themselves as though they were one—a pox on all of them! At any rate, because we lack one called "king", does this mean that this entire passage of Scripture is now obsolete, of no use, and no longer functions as inspired Scripture to Christians today? Taking the analogy of temporary, external husk versus the eternally relevant kernel/core of the scholars mentioned above, we are able to see this text as informing us about appropriate behavior of ANYONE who exercises ANY KIND OF AUTHORITY in any area, be that business, politics, education, or spiritual leadership. But as long as they don't multiply silver, gold, horses, chariots, and wives, are they in compliance with the divine decrees? How about if they use their positions to pad their pockets with paper money, bonds, health benefits to the hurt of those they are supposed to be leading and serving? What about those who hire mean-spirited body guards or other henchmen to do their bidding and make them feel good about the size of their "posse", making the people they serve pay for the very people used to keep them at a distance from their self-exalted leader? How about cavorting with high-priced escorts and having several mistresses on the side? Wouldn't that be OK so long as the leader didn't marry them, thus "multiplying wives"? And since we're talking contextualizing Scripture, why not simply understand this prohibition against large harems as a way of God saying to the leader: "Don't trust in your own ingenuity and in the power of the flesh to secure your dynasty's hold on power. The power is MINE to give and take away as I see fit. Trust ME to

secure your dynasty and give you an heir, not your own virility or the size of your harem. Serve ME and MY people as a servant-leader who sets the right example by relying on ME rather than relying on YOURSELF, and I will establish you and bless all through you.” 3) Here’s one example from another area of Mosaic legislation: agricultural law. When the Bible forbids the sowing of a field with two different kinds of seeds (or as in the domestic law of making a garment of two different kinds of material), we have to ask ourselves: how does this function as the Word of God to ME? I don’t have a garden, much less a field. OR, I DO have a garden, but my back yard is so small that I have okra, cucumbers, tomatoes, radishes, and all kinds of stuff—all in the same garden plot—woe is me!!! Do we just throw up our hands and give up? Do we Just transfer the entirety of the commandment directly into our modern, urbanized, western world and just live under constant condemnation? Or do we just do what so many well-meaning but terribly misdirected Christians do and play the “That was THEN; this is NOW” game? Cotton suggests here that God lovingly surrounded His people with constant reminders of His nature and of their responsibility to represent Him appropriately in their world. He suggests that some of these kinds of commandments were simply to mark His people with visible markers that they were His unique possession. Here’s one way that would help: a pagan neighbor would know that an Israelite was a follower of Yahweh by his agricultural practices and know who to go to when in need, when he wanted to hear the truth, and would know not to tempt him to come to a pagan ritual that would defile him. A fellow Israelite when traveling by would know that he could stop in and expect to be received with honor and respect, be nurtured and strengthened in his faith by the godly farmer. Cotton suggests this: every Israelite who looked upon a beautiful field, sown in its entirety with the same crop would be reminded of a God who is perfectly covenantally consistent, all cut out of the same cloth, never given to the fickleness which so marked the pagan gods with which they were surrounded. They were reminded of the God who gave such revelation, Who had blessed that field with a goodly yield, Who had blessed that farmer for his faithful obedience, etc. The same can be said for the garment: each time the owner put it on, washed it, mended it, he would be reminded of the faithfulness and covenantally consistent nature of his God Who always keeps His word and promises, and he would be challenged to return that same faithfulness and covenantal consistency back to God in loyal service and in accurate reflection of God’s character.

In these and myriad other examples (some easier and some harder), we are able to separate the husk from the kernel. We are able to distinguish between the external, the temporal, the ethnocentric, the nationalistic exterior or particular chronological/cultural expressions as compared to the core, the nucleus, the kernel of eternal truth that finds appropriate expression in every age, culture, gender, location, and people-group. In this way, though we have no real altar, no priesthood, no king, no tabernacle, no temple, no “corners of our fields,” no Levites, no tribal elders, etc., the eternal Word of God continues relevant to us and will remain so until His return. I should point out that this is NOT the same as reader-response/”this is what the Bible means to me” handling of Scripture. It

is a consistent, carefully worked out approach to certain aspects of the law that have specific, EXTERNAL components that are unique to a specific historical context. Note that it has NOTHING to do with MORAL LAW—moral law transfers over directly because it is universal. It doesn't matter where you live, who you are, when you live, taking the personal property of others will always be wrong. The pre-meditated taking of innocent life will never be acceptable, regardless of changes in culture, lifestyle, technology, and the like. The methodology I suggest above refers EXCLUSIVELY to the unusual civil, ceremonial, agricultural, dietary, ritual purity, etc., laws that have a time/culture/ethnicity/historical context-conditioned external application that MUST be translated cross-culturally, but which also have an eternally relevant kernel/principle that will NEVER change regardless of the size and number of contextual disconnects between us and them. By the way, Cotton states explicitly and then gives examples of how this kind of flexibility on the externals and eternity of the principles is actually in evidence WITHIN THE LAW OF MOSES itself, as Moses himself reapplies eternal principles to the changing situations the people of ancient Israel experienced as they went from slaves to free, from nomadic to sedentary, from pursued to conquerors, from original generation of the Exodus to the second generation.

I say these things and make these distinctions (between civil/ceremonial/agricultural/etc. laws versus moral law because it is directly germane to the current conversation regarding homosexuality, same-sex marriage, civil unions, non-traditional families, homosexual adoption, and the like. Sexual mores fall almost exclusively under the category of “moral law,” which is arguably unchanging with respect to standards, cultural evolution, etc. The early rabbis, extra-biblical literature, the characters in and authors of the NT, the early Christian church, the early Church Fathers, Christian leaders in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Great Awakening, and the Pentecostal revival of the early 20th century all understood this to be the case. What we're seeing today is entirely disjunctive from the voices from different races, continents, languages, and cultures that have spoken for Christianity up to this point in history.

Wave Nunnally, Ph.D.

For our discussions concerning homosexuality and polygamy, please see

<http://www.isitintheBible.com/general/Homosexuality.pdf>

<http://www.isitintheBible.com/general/polygamy.htm>