Does That Really Mean That?

How to Discern Whether a Biblical Command Is Culturally Specific or Universal

There are Bible passages that say not to eat pork, to greet one another with a holy kiss, for women to pray with their heads covered, for women not to braid their hair, for men to keep their hair short, for women to be silent in church, not to wear clothing with mixed fabrics, not to work on the Sabbath, not to have sex outside the marriage of a husband and wife, not to lie, to drink wine for your stomach, to wash one another's feet, and to wear tassels on the corners of your garments. Some even claim they are commanded to pick up snakes. How do you know which are to be taken literally, which communicate a principle, and which don't apply to us now?

It can be tempting to label something "not for today," particularly if it is unpopular. But being unpopular, or out of step with the culture, is not a good basis for deciding how to understand a Bible passage. What follows is a method for evaluating these passages consistently, rather than labeling a command "cultural" simply because it is inconvenient today. Each of the examples above appears below at the step where it best illustrates the question being asked.

The method at a glance

Phase	Questions to ask
Observe	1. What does the text actually say? 2. What kind of instruction is it? 3. Is it descriptive or prescriptive? 4. To whom is it addressed?
Interpret	5. What did it mean to the original audience? 6. What reason does the author give? 7. Does the passage identify a particular circumstance?
Apply	8. Where does it fall in the story of redemption? 9. How does the rest of Scripture treat the subject? 10. Is the outward form the requirement, or does it express a principle?

Phase	Questions to ask
	11. Can I apply this reasoning consistently?

Phase 1: Observe

Before deciding what a passage means for us, establish what it says and what kind of text it is. Most misreadings start here.

1. What does the text actually say?

Establish what the passage says before interpreting it. Distinguish the command itself from the reason given for it, the surrounding circumstances, and the consequences for disobedience. Read the whole sentence, and read parallel passages that address the same subject.

Braided hair (1 Tim 2:9; 1 Pet 3:3). Paul tells women to adorn themselves "not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire" (1 Tim 2:9, ESV). Peter's parallel lists braided hair, gold jewelry, and "the clothing you wear" (1 Pet 3:3). If Peter's words were read as an absolute ban on each item, they would forbid wearing clothes. Read whole, both passages contrast showy, expensive display with the inner adornment of godly character. The command concerns modesty and priorities; the braids are an example of the kind of extravagant display in view, not the point of the command.

Picking up snakes (Mark 16:18). Part of "what the text says" is establishing the text itself. Mark 16:9–20 is absent from our two oldest complete manuscripts (Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus), and most modern translations mark it as uncertain. Even if one accepts the passage, notice its form: it is a list of signs that will accompany believers, not a command to handle snakes. The one biblical example, Paul being bitten in Acts 28:3–6, was an accident God protected him from, not a deliberate act of worship. Building a practice on this verse requires both a disputed text and turning a promise into a command.

2. What kind of instruction is it?

Consider whether the passage is a moral prohibition, a church-order instruction, a ritual or ceremonial requirement, a civil law for ancient Israel, or a narrative of what someone did. These categories are not interchangeable.

For example, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Deuteronomy 19:15–21) is addressed to Israel's judges as a principle for proportional court sentencing. It does not function as a command

for individuals to take personal revenge (compare Matthew 5:38–39), nor as a direct command to a modern church.

Lying (Exodus 20:16; Leviticus 19:11; Ephesians 4:25; Colossians 3:9). A prohibition against lying is a moral command, and it is grounded in the character of God, who does not lie (Titus 1:2). No one seriously treats it as culturally temporary. Classifying a command is not the end of the analysis, but it tells you which questions matter most.

3. Is the passage descriptive or prescriptive?

The Bible describes many things it does not condone. It tells us Solomon had a thousand wives and concubines, but it does not approve; it explicitly says they turned his heart away from God (1 Kings 11:3–4). It records Jacob favoring Joseph over his brothers, but that does not mean parents should favor one child, and the story shows the damage it caused. Determine whether a passage is describing what happened or commanding that something be done. As noted above, the account of Paul and the viper in Acts 28 is description, not instruction.

4. To whom is it addressed?

Some instructions are given to a specific person in a specific situation.

Wine for your stomach (1 Tim 5:23). Paul tells Timothy, "No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." This is personal counsel to a particular man with particular health problems. Paul is not prescribing wine as a remedy for all stomach issues, nor issuing a command that all Christians drink wine.

God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son as a test (Genesis 22), but that command was never given to us. Likewise, in Ezra 9–10, during the special circumstance of re-establishing Temple worship after the exile, the people sent away foreign wives who were drawing Israel toward other gods. That is not a command to divorce a spouse of a different faith today (see Question 9 for how the New Testament addresses that directly). The circumstance and the audience must both be considered.

Phase 2: Interpret

Next, ask what the passage meant to its first hearers and why the author said it.

5. What did it mean to the original audience?

Investigate the historical, social, religious, and linguistic context. A gesture that communicates affection in one culture might communicate romantic intimacy, disrespect, or nothing at all in another.

But historical context alone does not prove that a command is temporary. We must ask what the author intended the original audience to learn and do.

Pork and shellfish (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14). The food laws had a specific meaning for Israel. Leviticus itself ties the distinction between clean and unclean animals to Israel's separation from the surrounding nations (Leviticus 20:24–26). The daily act of eating reminded them that they belonged to God and were to be holy and distinct. Understanding that purpose is the first step; whether the laws still bind Christians is answered at Question 8.

6. What reason does the author give?

The author's explanation is often one of the most important clues. A reason based on a local situation may suggest limited application. A reason based on creation, God's character, the gospel, or the nature of the church may suggest a broader application. However, neither category automatically settles the question. A creation reference still must be interpreted in context, and a local situation can illustrate a universal principle.

Sex outside marriage (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6; 1 Corinthians 6:16–18; Hebrews 13:4). When Jesus addresses marriage, he grounds it in creation: "He who created them from the beginning made them male and female" and the two become one flesh (Matthew 19:4–5). Paul grounds sexual purity in the believer's union with Christ and the body as a temple of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:15–20). Reasons rooted in creation and the gospel point strongly toward a universal standard.

Tassels (Numbers 15:37–41; Deuteronomy 22:12). The reason is stated plainly: the tassels were so Israel would look at them "and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them." That reason tells us the tassel served a purpose (remembrance) tied to Israel's covenant identity. Jesus himself wore them (Matthew 9:20; 14:36), and he criticized those who lengthened them for show (Matthew 23:5). The stated reason helps us see the principle beneath the practice.

Men's hair (1 Corinthians 11:14). Paul appeals to "nature itself" in saying long hair is a disgrace for a man. Whether "nature" here means the created order or the settled custom of the culture is one of the key questions in the head-covering passage, discussed in the worked example below.

7. Does the passage identify a particular circumstance?

Look for evidence of a local problem, a particular custom, a specific congregation, or an unusual situation. For example, 1 Corinthians addresses concrete problems in the Corinthian church, including divisions, lawsuits, disorder in worship, and questions about

spiritual gifts. That context matters, but it does not mean everything Paul says to Corinth applies only to Corinth.

Women silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:34–35; 1 Timothy 2:11–12). Here the local context is important. Just three chapters earlier, Paul assumes women will pray and prophesy aloud in the gathered church (1 Corinthians 11:5), so the silence in chapter 14 cannot mean total silence. It must refer to some particular kind of speech. Interpreters disagree about which: some see it as disruptive questioning during worship (note "let them ask their husbands at home," 14:35), some connect it to the evaluating of prophecies just discussed (14:29), and others see a broader principle about authority in the church, linked to 1 Timothy 2:12. Whatever conclusion one reaches, the circumstances in the text must be part of the argument, and any reading must make sense of 1 Corinthians 11:5.

Phase 3: Apply

Finally, ask how the passage functions for Christians today, in light of the whole Bible.

8. Where does it fall in the story of redemption?

Some commands were given as part of the Mosaic covenant, the arrangement between God and Israel at Sinai. The New Testament teaches that this covenant has been fulfilled in Christ and that believers now live under the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Galatians 3:24–25; Hebrews 8:13). This is often the deciding question, and it is a different question from whether something is "cultural." A command can be set aside not because it was a cultural preference but because it accomplished its purpose in God's plan.

Pork. Jesus taught that food does not defile a person, and Mark adds, "Thus he declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19). God then showed Peter in a vision that the clean/unclean food distinction no longer separated Jew from Gentile (Acts 10:9–16, 28). The laws that marked Israel off from the nations were fulfilled when Jew and Gentile were made one people in Christ (Ephesians 2:14–15).

Mixed fabrics (Leviticus 19:19; Deuteronomy 22:11). This prohibition belongs with the laws of separation and holiness in the Mosaic covenant. Many interpreters note that the high priest's garments appear to have combined these very materials (Exodus 28:6; 39:29), which suggests the law was a sign of holiness, reserving the mixture for what was set apart, rather than a moral rule about cloth.

Tassels. The tassels were a sign of Israel's covenant identity. The practice is not carried over into the new covenant, but its principle remains: God's people are to keep his commands before their eyes and in their hearts (compare Deuteronomy 6:6–9; Col 3:16).

Acts 15. At the Jerusalem Council, the apostles and elders, "with the whole church," decided that Gentile believers did not need to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:5, 19, 22). Interestingly, the same decision asked Gentiles to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what was strangled, and from sexual immorality (15:20, 29). Most churches today still teach the last of these but not the food restrictions. Why? Many interpreters see the food requests as concessions to keep table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers possible, while sexual immorality was a moral matter. This is itself a good test case for the method.

The Sabbath (Exodus 20:8–11). The Sabbath is a harder case, and Christians genuinely disagree. It is grounded in creation (Exodus 20:11), which suggests something enduring. But it is also called a sign of the Mosaic covenant (Exodus 31:13, 16–17), and the New Testament treats it differently from the other commandments. Paul tells believers not to let anyone judge them regarding a Sabbath (Colossians 2:16–17) and allows differing convictions about days (Romans 14:5–6). Some Christians hold that the Sabbath obligation transferred to the Lord's Day, some that it is fulfilled in the rest we have in Christ (Hebrews 4:9–10), and some that it continues as a principle of regular rest and worship. Each view is an attempt to account for both the creation grounding and the covenant sign.

9. How does the rest of Scripture treat the subject?

Compare similar commands, examples, and principles elsewhere in Scripture. Does the New Testament repeat the command? Does it give exceptions? Do other passages describe the practice differently?

Moral commands that are universal are often repeated in both the Old and New Testaments. The prohibition of sex outside marriage is a clear example: it is taught in the law (Exodus 20:14), the prophets, the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 15:19), and the letters (1 Corinthians 6:18; Heb 13:4). But repetition is an indicator, not a rule. It is neither necessary nor sufficient by itself. The Sabbath is the one command of the Ten not clearly restated as a command in the New Testament, which is part of why it is debated.

Ezra compared with 1 Corinthians 7. Earlier we noted that Ezra 9–10 should not be read as a command to divorce an unbelieving spouse. We do not have to guess: Paul addresses the situation directly and tells believers not to divorce an unbelieving spouse who is willing to stay (1 Corinthians 7:12–13). The comparison confirms that Ezra's situation was a specific one.

If you observe a pattern and the passage in question seems out of step with it, look for why a different response appears to be expected. There may be an important detail that affects how we should respond.

10. Is the outward form itself the requirement, or does it express a principle?

This is often the decisive question. If the command requires a particular action because that action has a particular meaning in its setting, a different action may preserve the intended meaning in another setting. But we must demonstrate that from the text and context; we cannot simply assume it.

The holy kiss (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14). The command appears five times, so it is not an isolated remark. But in that setting, a kiss was a common greeting among family and close friends. The command calls believers to greet one another as family with warm, pure affection. Peter calls it a "kiss of love" (1 Peter 5:14). In a culture where a kiss communicates something else, a handshake or embrace may carry the same meaning. The argument works because the meaning of the gesture can be shown from the context, not because the text fails to say "in every culture."

A caution: this question can be misused. In 1 Samuel 13, Saul was told to wait for Samuel to offer the sacrifice before battle. When Samuel was late and the army was scattering, Saul offered it himself, reasoning that the essential thing was to seek the Lord's favor (13:12). Samuel rebuked him: "You have not kept the command of the LORD your God" (13:13). Saul substituted his own judgment about what really mattered for an explicit instruction. Distinguishing form from principle is legitimate only when the text gives us grounds to do it.

11. Can the interpretation be applied consistently?

Test whether you would use the same reasoning for a passage you agree with and one you disagree with. If you call a command cultural only because you dislike its implications, your method is not reliable. If the reasoning you use to set aside one command would also set aside the prohibition on lying, something has gone wrong.

Also ask what evidence would change your conclusion. If no evidence could change it, you may be defending a prior position rather than interpreting the text.

Putting It Together: Two Worked Examples

Example A: Washing one another's feet (John 13:1–17)

> **Observe.** Jesus washes his disciples' feet and says, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you

an example" (John 13:14–15). This is prescriptive, and it is addressed to the disciples as a pattern for all who follow Jesus.

Interpret. Foot washing was ordinary hospitality in a world of dusty roads and sandals (Gen 18:4; Luke 7:44), and usually the job of a servant. Jesus' stated reason is his own example of humble service: the Lord taking the lowest role (13:12–16).

Apply. The principle is clearly universal: believers are to serve one another humbly, even in lowly tasks. Whether the form itself is required is where Christians differ. Some traditions observe foot washing as an ongoing practice, while most treat it as an example to be expressed in many forms of humble service. Either way, the method keeps the principle front and center. Washing feet once a year while refusing to serve others would miss the point entirely.

Example B: Head coverings and hair length (1 Corinthians 11:2–16)

Observe. Paul says a woman should cover her head when she prays or prophesies, and a man should not (11:4–7). He adds that long hair is a disgrace for a man but a glory for a woman (11:14–15). This is prescriptive, addressed to the church at Corinth about its worship.

Interpret. Paul gives several reasons, and they point in different directions. Some are rooted in creation and the order of headship (11:3, 7–9). Others appeal to propriety and custom: "Judge for yourselves: is it proper…?" (11:13), "Does not nature itself teach you…?" (11:14), and "we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God" (11:16). Background studies suggest that in Roman Corinth a head covering signaled a respectable married woman, and that a man covering his head could be associated with pagan religious leadership.

Apply. Here faithful interpreters reach different conclusions, and the method helps clarify why:

- Some hold that the creation reasoning makes the covering itself a requirement for all times and places.
- Some hold that the principle (honoring God-given distinctions between men and women, and avoiding shame in worship) is universal, while the covering was the culturally meaningful way to express it in Corinth.

- Some note that Paul calls a woman's long hair "a covering" (11:15) and read the passage as being mainly about hair.

The disagreement centers on Questions 6 and 10: how much weight to give the creation reasons versus the appeals to custom, and whether the outward form carries the meaning or expresses it. Whatever conclusion you reach, you should be able to show it from the text and apply the same reasoning consistently elsewhere.

Summary

Not every command in Scripture applies in the same way, but that is not a license to keep what we like and discard what we don't. A careful reader observes what the text says and what kind of text it is, interprets it in its original setting and by the author's own reasons, and applies it in light of the whole story of redemption. When the reasons are rooted in God's character, creation, and the gospel, and when the command is consistent across both Testaments, we should be very slow to call it cultural. When we do conclude that a form was cultural, we should still ask what principle it expressed and how we will obey that principle today.

For further reading

- J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word*
- Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*
- William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*
- William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*
- Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth* (background for the Corinthian passages)