

THE FOLSOM
VIEW

“...HAVING THE EYES OF YOUR HEART ENLIGHTENED...” EPHESIANS 1:18

A PUBLICATION OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST MEETING AT 900 E. NATOMA, FOLSOM, CA 95630

Principles, Precepts & the Culture

BY DAVID POSEY

A *precept* is a direct command, an imperative, “do this,” “don’t do that.” A *principle* is a fundamental, primary or general law or truth from which others are derived. For example, “the principles of morality taught by Jesus...” We say, it’s the “principle of the thing,” implying that there is an underlying, perhaps commonly accepted truth. For example, if someone steals \$1 from you, you may not be concerned about the \$1, but you may still proceed with action against them: “it’s the principle of the thing” (i.e., people shouldn’t steal).

Historically, the Jews failed to see principles and piled precept upon precept and became blind to Christ’s teachings, which were primarily principles — underlying truths from which others were derived.

Let me see if I can illustrate the difference in precept and principle. We told Angie after she got her car, never, ever, under any circumstances pick up a hitchhiker. That’s was a clear, well-stated **precept**. Suppose she’s driving along one day and sees a young man on the side of the road with his thumb out. If she pulls over and picks him up, she has violated a clear precept and will be punished.

But let’s say she has no intention of picking him up, but as she gets closer, she notices that it is her brother with his thumb out, standing by his car, which has obviously broken down. She could drive right on by, and keep the precept. Or, she could stop and pick him up. If she does, has she violated the precept? No. The reason is because *there was a principle behind the precept*.

The principle was safety: do not pick up strangers because it might put your life in jeopardy. There was also an implied condition: do not pick up hitchhikers that are strangers.

All precepts work in conjunction with other precepts and principles. Another precept is, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:40). Keeping the precept of not picking up hitchhikers would contradict the precept of loving your neighbor

(which obviously includes a brother). She would violate a principle (or another precept) by keeping a command that came from a principle that she would not have violated had she stopped to pick him up. In other words, she could not have violated the precept because she could not have violated the principle by giving her brother a ride.

Sometimes, precepts change; principles do not. The principle of being careful with people you interact with, whether a hitchhiker or a stranger, never changes. But precepts may change. For example, you tell a 3-year-old, “don’t take candy from a stranger...” But at some point, that precept no longer makes any sense. The principle doesn’t change: be careful how you interact with strangers. But the details of how that is applied may well change. When he’s 30, it’s OK to take the candy.

In fact, even in the matter of salvation, precepts have changed dramatically. In the first days after creation, God spoke to the head of families directly; he gave them specific laws and principles. Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat a certain fruit from a certain tree. That’s a precept. Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac. Lot’s wife was told not to look back. None of these precepts apply to us today. Yet each one of them had an underlying principle (perhaps more than one). One obvious principle behind all of these is the principle of faith. For example, James uses the sacrifice of Isaac to describe the principle of faith (James 2:21).

Under the Law of Moses, many other precepts were given — precept-upon-precept! Read the book of Leviticus and marvel at the sheer volume of precepts. However, there was a principle behind every precept. Most of those precepts are not repeated in the New Testament, but the *principles* are. For example, the Israelites were not to eat certain foods. It has often been assumed that God gave those laws for health reasons and there may be a speckle of truth in that assumption. But the primary reason God gave special laws to Israel is so that they would remember that they were a “special people,” a people for God’s own possession. Every time a Jew made a decision to obey God in his selection of food, he was reminded that he had

been chosen for a purpose. That same principle exists today (1 Pet. 2:9)

There is a principle behind every precept. Much of the time, the principle is stated, if we'll just keep reading. Let's look at some.

If we don't understand the enormously important role that principle plays in the New Testament, we're going to have a very difficult time understanding its teaching. Worse, we are liable to come to just about any conclusion and claim it comes from the Bible. For example, those who see only "precepts" may become more concerned with whether the bread is broken before or after the prayer (a precept?) than the momentous event taking place at the Table (principle); or, they may decide to fast or wash feet, because we read of both in passages in the New Testament; or, one can focus so much on baptism as precept that he forgets what it *does* (the principle).

Those who find only commands to be obeyed and forget the place of principle can find little use for specific, cultural or time-related material in the New Testament such as the "anointing with oil" of Jas. 5:14, the foot-washing of John 13 or the long list of greetings in the 16th of Romans. Those who understand the power of principle can draw great lessons from such passages.

There are some important cultural principles that should be considered, though culture itself can never change God's word. But sometimes culture affects how we *apply* it.

For example, today we do not "greet one another with a holy kiss," as Paul commands in Romans 16:16. Why? For one thing, we have no real knowledge about how to practice it. What is a "holy kiss"? But we can apply the *principle* that we should greet each other, in a form acceptable to people today; e.g., a handshake.

Paul specifically addresses slaves and masters in his letters (cf. Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1). Should we reinstate slavery in order to practice these commands? Of course not. We apply the principles, most commonly to employee-employer relationships.

In first century Corinth, women in pagan religions were leading in worship, speaking "ecstatic utterances" (it sounded like someone was underwater: *glub, glub, glub*). These women often shaved their head and cast off the veils of modesty that most women wore in those days.

We also know that women in the Eastern Mediterranean covered their hair when they got married. Many considered the hair the chief

element of female beauty and that it should be seen only by the husband. Thus, many associated uncovered hair with seduction. Wealthy women, however, paid a lot for their hairstyles and often left their hair uncovered, creating a visible sign distinguishing poor and rich (Craig Keener, "Veils, Kisses and Biblical Commands," Christianity Today, October 26, 1998).

Given these cultural realities, it is possible that Paul told the Corinthian women (1 Cor. 11) to cover their heads because it was immodest (in that society) to leave the head uncovered. Perhaps the message to the wealthier women was to cover your head and remove the distinctions between rich and poor.

Having said that, we must apply the cultural argument to questions gingerly; they must come into play only when it is obvious and when direct application of the command or example would lead to contradiction or even an impossible-to-follow rule.

For example, the text talks about hair length, but nothing is specified. How do we know how long is long? If Paul meant to impose this rule today, we would expect to find deeper instructions. Otherwise, the "rule" simply sets up an environment for disagreement since, ultimately, "long" or "short" is a matter of opinion.

Even modest apparel is a cultural issue, to some degree. What is decent today was not decent 100 years ago. Yet, most of us know immodesty when we see it. But efforts to define what length of shorts or dress is acceptable is just opinion, no matter how hard we pound the pulpit. I've heard preachers say "if you have to tug on your skirt after you sit down, it's too short." I think that's a fine guideline and makes sense. But we can't impose it as a rule from God, because God never said such a thing.

Cultural considerations can never unpack a clear command of God. Women are restricted in their public role by command, not culture. 1 Tim. 2:11-12 imposes a timeless obligation on women: they are not allowed to teach "over a man" regardless of the culture in which they live.

Jesus taught by principle and precept; but mature Christians always see the principle behind the precept and live accordingly.

DP