

Christian Symbols

An exploratory study

Philip Nunn
Armenia, Colombia
February 2005

Source: www.philipnunn.com

CONTENTS

Christian Symbols - An exploratory study -

Acknowledgements

- A. Our Lord God likes to use Symbols
- B. How rigidly should Symbols be used?
- C. Motivation, Realism and Controversy
- D. Christian Baptism
- E. The Lord's Supper
- F. Sexual distinction in the Church
- G. Covered-uncovered Head
- H. Conclusion

Appendix:

Other Possible Christian Symbols

- (a) Associated with prayer
 - (b) Associated with diet
 - (c) Associated with lifestyle
 - (d) More possible symbols
- Final words

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During this last year, I have enjoyed happy, open and thought provoking internet interchange on this issue of Christian Symbols with about twenty brothers and sisters who serve the Lord sincerely within different cultures (England, Holland, Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy, Canada, United States, D. R. Congo, Ecuador, Surinam and Colombia). Thank you, dear brothers and sisters, for taking the time to read draft copies of this paper and its appendix. Thank you for making an effort to express your agreements and explain your disagreements. Your contributions have challenged, influenced and sharpened my thinking. It is clear that we will not all agree on everything and that some of our differences are deeply felt. May the Lord use the study of this paper to simulate an atmosphere of serious, friendly and sincere dialogue in homes and assemblies.

Again, my heart felt "thank you".

CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS

In one of David's songs, we read "pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge" Psalm 62:8. If your prayers have any sense of earnestness, you immediately understand what the song is urging us to do. Yet notice the interesting figurative use of words. David does not mean a literal "heart", neither can anyone "pour out" this useful solid organ. This study is not about symbolic and figurative language. Neither is it about non-verbal religious language. These are interesting yet very extensive subjects.

In this study we define a **symbol** is a tangible thing or a physical procedure that has been chosen to represent something else. With symbols, the visible is used to express something abstract, absent or invisible. By **Christian symbol** we refer to the symbols or symbolic acts we find in the Bible which were practiced by the early church and those which could or should be used by Christians today, be it privately or collectively.

Over the years, as some become Christians, and other dear believers join us from other Christian congregations, sooner or later questions arise about symbols. Do I need to be baptised again? When can I break bread? Do you use bread with yeast? Why do sisters cover their head? Do you sometimes anoint with oil the sick at prayer meetings? Can I eat "morcilla" (a typical Colombian sausage made of blood)? When does the assembly meet for prayer and fasting? Do you lay hands on people? I am writing (with many interruptions!) from within this context. In the main body of this study we shall consider three symbols: Baptism, the Lord's Supper and the cover-uncover symbol. In the appendix you will find some background to explore other possible Christian symbols and symbolic acts.

How do these three symbols differ from the other possible Christian symbols? The first two carry the weight of being instructions given directly by our Lord Jesus while incarnate on earth. The third, as we shall see, has a different standing to the first two, yet it is included in a package of apostolic instructions which end with the words "what I am writing to you is the Lord's command" 1 Corinthians 14:37. Notice that this third symbol is also associated with the Lord's teachings. Do Christian symbols have the same importance? When the Lord reveals His will in Scripture, how do we determine what is important? We are saved without baptism, we can worship without the Lord's Supper, the Lord can answer prayer without fasting and without oil. Christian Symbols should be studied, understood and used not because a relationship with God is impossible without them, but out of obedience and submission to Divine revelation. When this revelation allows for a degree of diversity, we must humbly recognize this and resist the temptation to impose our particular tradition.

Secular Symbols

Symbols are not outdated and old-fashioned things. They are quite common even in today's modern society. Countries and departments use flags and pictures to identify

themselves. Their colours and pictures usually have some meaning. Large companies and organizations also use graphic symbols to represent themselves, such as the PEPSI sign and the Red Cross. Along many roads we find traffic signs. Symbols are there to communicate something; they help us visualize concepts and remember them.

Religious Symbols

Spiritual and religious people also use a good number of symbols and ceremonies. The Moslems use a crescent moon, pray on their knees and bow down expressing their reverence to Allah. The Jews use the Star of David in their Synagogues. Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs all have their set of symbols and symbolic rituals.

A. OUR LORD GOD LIKES TO USE SYMBOLS

Our Lord God chose many different ways and forms to communicate His mind to us humans. In the Bible we find real life stories and parables, dramas and songs, doctrine and poetry. The inspired authors have expressed themselves using a variety of literary forms: hyperbolae, metaphors, comparisons, similes, allegories, irony, paradoxes, etc. Some things such as oil, gold, fire have some special meanings. Animals, such as lions, serpents and doves are used as figures of speech to denote qualities such as strength, cleverness or gentleness. Some places like Egypt, Babylon and Jerusalem also have their meaning, and so do a few numbers.

An interesting collection of objects, people and events before Christ have prophetic significance, and many of them point towards Christ. These objects, people and events are normally called **figures** or **types**. For example, the water from the rock and Jonah in the whale are types of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4; Matthew 12:40). But we also find some special symbolic objects and ceremonies which have been purposefully designed by God to teach us spiritual realities. Some of these are referred to as **shadows** (Colossians 2:16, 17; Hebrews 8:5; 10:1, 2).

Old Testament Symbols

After the flood, God said to Noah that He would never again flood the world. Together with this covenant, God provided a sign or symbol: the rainbow (Genesis 9: 12, 13). Even today, the rainbow stands as a reminder of God's promise. The sacrifices of animals were essentially symbolic acts. From the sacrifices offered by Cain and Abel to the more detailed sacrifices described by Moses, we find God preparing the human mind through symbols to understand and receive the supreme sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The construction of the Tabernacle and its variety of ceremonies were designed to represent spiritual concepts. Blood, circumcision, the Ark of the Covenant, the clothing of the priest are all symbols given by God to help visualize, understand or remember spiritual realities.

New Testament Symbols

With the arrival of the Christian church, many things changed. The purpose of many Old Testament symbols and symbolic acts found their fulfilment in Christ.

The Lord Jesus was very graphic in the way he taught. He used a rich variety of didactic stories and parables. He often expressed ideas in pictures. For example, Jesus tells Peter "I will give you the **keys** of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19). He used the term "keys" as a figure of speech, referring to a special role Peter would play in God's purposes. The term **door**, for example, is used figuratively in very interesting ways. Jesus said "I am the door of the sheep". He taught about a wide door and a narrow door. In Revelation 3:20 He is knocking at a door. In prison, the apostle prayed for a door to open (Colossians 4:3). In Acts 14:27 he reports how God had "opened the door of faith to the Gentiles". In an enthusiastic and graphic way, the apostle explains why he chose to remain in Ephesus: "because a great door for

effective work has been opened to me, and there are many who oppose me” (1 Corinthians 16:9).

In some countries, the **cross** has become a symbol of the Christian faith. When the apostle Paul said in Galatians 6:14 that he would only boast “in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”, was he proposing a new physical symbol for the Christian era? Surely he uses the term cross figuratively. In the previous chapter (Galatians 5:11) he uses the expression “the offence of the cross”. It was not a model of a physical cross that upset those brothers who promoted circumcision, it was the gospel of grace which Paul preached. He used the term “cross” meaning “gospel”. In 1 Corinthians 1: 17 Paul refers to the “power” of the cross. This is not a reference to a mystical superstitious power invested in a model of a physical cross. Its meaning is clarified in the following verse: “the message of the cross... is the power of God”. God’s power is displayed through the gospel.

In the New Testament we also find some very graphic ways of teaching. In John 13 we find that Jesus **washed the feet** of his disciples. On finishing he adds “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet” (v.15). Is this a symbolic act that we Christians should practice periodically? Unlikely. There was a need: their feet were dirty. There was a custom: servants wash the feet of guests. There was pride: they had an interest in being “the greatest”. Jesus observed an opportunity to teach a practical lesson on humble service. Would the disciples ever forget that lesson? The Lord’s conclusion also applies to you and me: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (v.17). But the Lord also had another lesson in mind. In verses 10 and 11 He uses the word **clean** in a figurative way to denote the state of the heart. He knew Peter would understand this second lesson some time later (v.7). Sometimes it takes time to understand some spiritual lessons. Jesus didn’t pressure Peter. We should also be patient with one-another.

Among all these teaching styles and figurative expressions, the New Testament does contain a number of physical symbols and symbolic acts. Some are given to the Christians with instructions that we should use them (like baptism). Others are suggested, their use being optional (like fasting). Others are simply cultural applications of a timeless principle (like the holy kiss).

B. HOW RIGIDLY SHOULD SYMBOLS BE USED?

A woman may choose to wear a wedding ring without being married. She would be using a social symbol without living the implied reality. Some cultures adhere strongly to their symbols; other cultures treat their symbols as optional or even as a fashion. When God gives a symbol, He does not expect the symbol to be used independently from the reality it represents. Reality is always more important than its symbol. Some biblical examples illustrate this:

- a. Sacrifices: At a number of points in their history, Israelites thought that God would accept their sacrifices in any shape or form. The Lord God did ask for animal sacrifices but He would reject them if they were given mechanically, grudgingly, without sincerity, or without feeling (Hosea 6:6; Malachi 1:13, 14). The message was clear: "To obey is better than sacrifice" 1 Samuel 15:22.
- b. Solemn Feasts: It was God himself who designed these Jewish national feasts, but He would also reject them if they did not reflect an inner reality or if they were accompanied by iniquity (Isaiah 1:13, 14).
- c. Baptism: Christ taught that every Christian should be baptised (Matthew 28:19, 20). But baptism in itself doesn't change anybody. Philip baptised Simon, and afterwards the apostle Peter says to Simon: "Your heart is not right before God... you are full of bitterness and captive to sin" Acts 8:13-23. When a non-Christian is baptized, he participates in a symbolic act without the living reality. We shall explore this in more detail later on.

Most symbols have a purpose. When a person doesn't understand this purpose, the symbol is meaningless to him. Even worse, he may attach his own mistaken meaning to the symbol! When a symbol is separated from the reality it represents, it loses its value. The symbol has its worth because it is representing something.

- d. The Bronze Serpent: In the middle of a plague of serpents, God gave Moses instructions to lift up a bronze serpent on a pole. When an Israelite was bitten by a snake, he could look at the bronze serpent and he would not die (Numbers 21:4-9). When the plague was over, the Israelites kept the bronze snake, gave it a special name, and began to offer incense to it. They turned it into just another idol. As part of the reforms king Hezekiah made to return to the true worship of God, he "broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made" 2 Kings 18:4.

Symbol is and will always be only a symbol. Even when a symbol is given by God, even if a symbol is a picture of Christ, it is possible for us to give it too much attention (John 3:14, 15). We can corrupt the symbol by attributing to it powers and special benefits. We can become superstitious. We, like the Israelites, can also go astray and turn God-given symbols into idols!

God Expects Obedience

In the Bible we find some special incidents when God reacted in a very strong way against those who for personal reasons ignored, disrespected or did not take His symbols seriously.

- a. The Altar of Incense: The Lord wanted the priests to offer Him burnt incense. But they could only offer God a certain type of incense which He himself had prescribed. Furthermore, where they brought the fire from was also important. We read that Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, "offered unauthorised fire before the Lord contrary to his command". The Lord punished this deviation: "and they died before the Lord" (Exodus 30:9; Leviticus 10:1, 2).
- b. Circumcision: God ordained that all the male descendants of Abraham should be circumcised on their eighth day. This was a sign that the boy belonged to the nation of Israel. Moses, probably due to some differences with his wife, did not circumcise his eldest son. Because of this, "the Lord met [Moses] and was about to kill him" (Genesis 17:11, 12; Exodus 4:24-26).
- c. The Ark of the Covenant: This was a very special ark which represented the Lord's presence among His people. One day, some curious Israelites decided to have a look inside. After all, it was only a wooden box covered in gold. Because of that act of irreverence, the Lord killed a large number of them! (1 Samuel 6:19).
- d. The Lord's Supper: Some Christians at Corinth took part in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, not discerning the reality behind the symbols, not recognizing the body of the Lord. The Lord was not pleased. Because of this, some had died and others were weak and sick (1 Corinthians 11:28-30).

Of course, these are very special cases. Thankfully the Lord in His mercy does not commonly act in such a severe way. But, we cannot escape the fact that God did so in the past. These are historical narratives. One clear lesson from these special cases is that when the Lord gives a symbol, He does expect His people to take them into account.

Does God Allow Exceptions?

The Christian faith is in essence internal, a daily living relationship with Jesus Christ. Of course this relationship radically affects the way we live. Christianity, therefore, although it has symbols, is not based on symbols. Symbols are not the reality. For our God, reality is always more important than its symbols. With this in mind, situations will arise where it will be evident that, before God, a symbol must be temporarily modified or even set aside.

- a. Ahimelech's situation: Take for example the actions of Ahimelech the priest. In a moment of crisis, when David and his companions were very hungry, Ahimelech gave them the consecrated or holy bread (shew-loaves) to eat. These were very

special loaves, described as “most holy” which only Aaron and his sons should eat (1 Samuel 21:4-6; Leviticus 24:5-9; Luke 6:2-4).

- b. Hezekiah’s situation: In 2 Chronicles 30 we read how King Hezekiah celebrated the “Passover to the LORD” (v.5). He had some good reason why he did not celebrate it on the appointed month (vv. 2-4). Then, “Most of the many people who came... had not purified themselves, yet they ate the Passover, contrary to what was written”. Would you have joined them? Would you have criticised Hezekiah? Would you have found an excuse to abstain to play it safe? But how did God react? The Lord forgave them, healed them, and gave them “unity of mind” to carry out the Passover in this abnormal way. Why? The Lord understood the special situation and knew that these people had set their heart “on seeking God – the LORD” (vv. 12, 18-20). Evidently the Lord prefers a sincere heart that truly seeks Him to a set of technically correct procedures.

So far we conclude that symbols were given by God to represent spiritual realities. These symbols were never given to mechanically bind and enslave. The symbol should accompany or follow a spiritual reality, and should be practised with the right condition of heart. It is evident that our Lord God prefers holy passion to holy procedures, but it is also clear that unless there is a good reason, He expects His people to value and use the symbols He gives.

C. MOTIVATION, REALISM AND CONTROVERSY

The topics that follow divide serious Christians. Heated discussions about Christian Baptism and the Lord's Supper have raged for centuries. The debate on the cover-uncover symbol is much more recent. Perhaps I could ask you: Why are you reading this? Are you a lover of doctrinal controversy? Controversy by itself imprisons Christianity in your head. Christianity, the real thing, involves much more than your head. It brings joy, freedom and abundant life. Are you looking for ammunition to judge or to fight back? Relax! No one is trying to prove you are wrong! I would like to invite you to allow yourself to take a fresh look at some of these topics. Personally I have tried to do so in the process of preparing this study. As we open our minds to Scripture and the guiding light of the Holy Spirit, God's word comes to life, and our comfortable patterns and customs are frequently challenged. This is sometimes painful, but very healthy. This study is no final word. It desires to be a help to Biblical thinking.

Our common hunger is to return to simple historic Christianity. And as we dig deeper into Acts and the epistles, we slowly begin to notice that not everything in historic Christianity was so simple. Early Christians grappled with some deep controversies. The path to salvation is beautifully simple, that even a young child may trust Christ and be assured of eternal life. Yet within the primitive church, saints were forced to address complex issues. The transition between the God given Jewish faith and Christianity was not a smooth path. Religious and regional traditions had their impact on internal assembly harmony. Pagan and ungodly customs tried to be blessed within the Church. Every assembly had its share of carnal and complicated saints. False teachers and prophets circulated. No wonder the apostle Paul (and others) were so busy and suffered so much! When you think about it, is our current modern setting so different from that of historic Christianity? Christ is the only Perfect One. All servants and all churches have been deficient. Early Christians did not truly live up to their high personal and collective calling. We, like they, are invited to set out hearts and minds on this high personal and collective calling - and press forward, with faith, with passion and with realism. In doing this we shall walk in apostolic footsteps.

By design, Christianity should be **Christ Centred**, a life of relationship with Christ and inevitable with one another. In the intellectual West, it became **Bible or Doctrine Centred**, and this was the style of Christianity commonly exported to the mission field in the 1800's. They wanted pagans to agree with a set of true doctrines and behave more like "us". But doctrine alone, however true, eventually turns us into emotionless robots, driven by fear or duty. The practice of Christian symbols also has this hidden danger. In apostolic language: "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life", 2 Corinthians 3:6. And what about our generation? Modern Christianity has become **Self Centred**. There is a mad rush to keep "me" happy, to find my fulfilment, my experience, my spiritual reality. The new leadership is doing its best to keep these complicated new Christian customers happy. How much will Christianity have to divert from its high calling to continue to attract and satisfy this rapidly changing secular and religious market?

The three symbols we are about to study are part of Scripture and practiced by Christians for many centuries. And yet, some Christians love them and some hate them. Some mystify them, over-complicate them and some nearly worship them! In contrast, some undervalue them or simply ignore them. In what follows, we desire is to highlight God's love for symbols and motivate their proper use in a Biblical non-rigid way.

D. CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

The Lord Jesus gave us the instruction to baptise. In the epistles we find the meaning of baptism and we turn to the Gospels and Acts to explore how to do it.

Contributing towards the meaning of baptism, we read the following in the epistles:

“Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” Romans 6:3, 4.

“... Having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” Colossians 2:12.

When a new believer is being baptized, he is declaring essentially three things: (1) that his sins have been forgiven, (2) that he has died to his old life [being identified with Christ in death], and (3) that he now lives a new life [having been identified with Christ in resurrection life].

Diverse Views on Baptism: Through the years, Christians have developed different traditions in connection with this symbol. Different interpretations lead to different practices. Some understand baptism as necessary to wash away the “original sin” or as necessary for salvation of the soul. Baptism then becomes an urgent necessity. In contrast, a congregation not too far from where I live uses Hebrews 6:1-3 to lay aside the baptism symbol completely. Other Christians view baptism as the New Testament equivalent to circumcision in the Old Testament. This understanding leads to the practice of “infant baptism”, where all babies are baptised to identify them with “the people of God”. Others, observing God’s inclination to bless households, talk about “household baptism”. If the head of the household has become a Christian, he is encouraged to baptise all the family members under his authority, irrespective of age. They understand that this baptism introduces the whole family into the “Kingdom of Heaven” or into Christianity as a world religion (also referred to as “the large house” or “nominal Christianity”). Their prayer is that some day their small children will also become genuine Christians. For many centuries, much literature has been written supporting these differing views.

Baptism and Forgiveness: One clear and fundamental truth of Scripture is that only the blood of Jesus Christ can wash away our sins (Ephesians 1:7). Jesus would not have died if forgiveness could be attained some other way. The Lord Jesus commissioned the apostle Paul to preach the gospel “so that they may receive **forgiveness** of sins and a place among those who are sanctified **by faith in me**” Acts 26:18. The Lord Jesus does not mention Baptism as a condition for forgiveness.

Sometimes baptism is associated with forgiveness. In Acts 2:38 Peter urged the Jews who had crucified Christ to “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”. It is possible that repentance

and baptism can occur at the same time. Comparing this verse with other Scriptures, it becomes clear that baptism is not the agent of forgiveness. The same apostle Peter makes this clear when a few days later he declares “Repent then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out” Acts 3:19. Here he refers to forgiveness without any reference to baptism. When Peter shared the gospel with Cornelius, he ended by saying “All the prophets testify about him [Jesus] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name”. After seeing some evidence of new birth, Peter said “Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water?” (Acts 10:43-48). Once they had received forgiveness, the symbol of baptism followed. The symbol of baptism is designed for all believers everywhere. Have you been forgiven? Have you given your life to Jesus? Have you now been baptised? If not, what are you waiting for? The Lord Jesus expects every true Christian to be baptised (Matthew 28:19, 20).

Baptism and Nominal Christianity: Baptism has been used by some as a tool to expand outward or nominal Christianity. When Latin America was being explored and conquered, many Indians were forced into baptism and were considered added to the Christian Church. I would suggest that our God has never been interested in nominal Christianity. Jesus never showed any interest in collecting outward followers. It is, therefore, very unlikely that Jesus would provide a symbol to expand the group of outward followers. His Holy Spirit works in the soul to motivate genuine conversion. The prime object of Christ in this current age is to build His Church. There is no need to become first a nominal Christian and then a genuine one. Nominal Christianity is our human distortion of real Christianity. It is a fact that it exist, but not by divine design. Christian baptism is a symbol given to His Church, not to expand nominal Christianity but to publicly identify genuine Christians with Jesus Christ. It is possible that sometimes, by deceit or mistake, non-Christians may be baptised. Some would then consider these added to nominal Christianity. But this is not the purpose of baptism.

Baptism and Blessing: Some encourage parents to baptise their babies so that these may be in a position to benefit from a special blessing from the Lord. But again, this is not the purpose of baptism. The fact that children receive the godly influence of at least one Christian parent ensures that they are in a place of blessing. The special attention to the children and the unbelieving partner is not conditioned with baptism (1 Corinthians 7:12-14). In fact, all people benefit and are blessed by God when there are real Christians in their family, school, office or government. What kind of Christianity are you living? Are those around you being blessed because you are a Christian?

Practising the symbol

Most Christians concur that the symbol of baptism should not be dismissed. The expression “believed and were baptised” which appears a number of times (Acts 8:12, 13; 18:8) suggests that baptism should naturally follow belief. This is why many use the term “believer’s baptism”. Because of this close connection between believing and being baptised, the Christian baptism may be considered an initiation symbol for new believers.

The mode of baptism: The Greek word BAPTIZO, from which we have the terms “baptism” and “to baptize” has a number of meanings. The most common are: to dip into, to immerse, to be overwhelmed with or to be fully identified with. This strongly suggests that when a person is baptised, he or she should be immersed completely. When Jesus was in Bethany, a woman brought some very expensive perfume and “poured the perfume on his head”, Mark 4:3. The word BAPTIZO is not used here. In fact, the New Testament has five different Greek words for “pour” and two different Greek words for “sprinkle”. None of these are used in connection with Christian baptism. The act of going in and out of water is evident in Acts 8:38, 39: “Philip and the eunuch went down **into** the water and Philip baptised him. When they came up **out of** the water...” As a teaching tool, it is useful to notice that the physical act of going into the water and coming out again, aptly fits the death, burial and new life it represents.

Baptism and Jesus: What words should be pronounced when a person is baptised? Jesus instructed to baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” Matthew 28:19, 20. In the Acts we find examples where people are baptized “in the name of Jesus”. Rather than being another baptismal formula, we could understand this as a practical way to distinguish the baptism carried out in obedience to the instructions of Jesus from other types of baptism.

Some Christians, to reconcile the instructions of Jesus in the Gospels with the examples in the book of Acts, say “In the name of Jesus, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. This could also be considered a good solution. But if we follow the Lord’s instructions in Matthew 28 and simply use His words, surely we can’t go wrong!

Who should take the initiative: When Philip finished explaining the gospel, the eunuch asked “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” Acts 8:37. In this case, we see the new convert taking the initiative. If you are now a Christian and you are not baptized, ask yourself “why shouldn’t I be baptized?” Don’t be passive. Take the initiative. In Jesus’ instructions, we are told to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” Matthew 28:19. Here we note that the evangelist should also take the initiative. Don’t be satisfied with a conversion. It is also our responsibility to encourage baptism and continued growth!

E. THE LORD'S SUPPER

This is a symbolic event to remember the redemptive death of our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank Him with all our heart and we worship Him. The bread represents the body of Christ, and the cup the new covenant in his blood. "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes". Christ himself chose a memorial. He did not ask us to build statues or monuments. As long as we are on earth, He would like us to remember Him and His death while eating and drinking a simple symbolic meal (1 Corinthians 11: 24-26). Apart from representing Christ's physical body, the one loaf also represents Christ's spiritual body, made up of all the born again believers on earth (1 Corinarian 10:17). The Lord's invitation to every born again believer is "Do this in remembrance of me". Do you value this invitation? Do you respond to it regularly? Do you take part in the Lord's Supper?

Terms used: Three terms are used: Since Jesus started this symbolic meal by breaking the bread, sometimes the whole event is referred to simply as **The Breaking of Bread** (Acts 2:42; 20:7). **The Lord's Supper** (1 Corinthians 11:20) is a general descriptive term, drawing attention to the fact that the symbol is a meal, and at least initially, an evening meal. Meals and tables are commonly used as expressions of friendship and fellowship. The term **The Lord's Table** (1 Corinthians 10:21) is only used once in the New Testament. It is mentioned in contrast with "the table of demons". The context makes it very clear that believers who desire to participate in the Lord's symbolic meal must make a complete break with all satanic or demonic activity. The term table highlights the fellowship aspect of this symbolic act: genuine fellowship with Christ. The Lord's Table is not the piece of furniture on which we place the bread and the cup. The word table is used figuratively to speak of our communion with Christ. When we participate in this memorial, we should move beyond forms and procedures and seek to live moments of true communion with the present Christ. The fact that it is **the Lord's Supper**, and **the Lord's Table** reminds us that we are the guests, and He sets the rules!

Some background: Centuries before the Lord Jesus instituted this symbolic meal of remembrance, there was a Jewish custom, at least among some, where friends and family would eat and drink in memory of a dead person (Jeremiah 16:7). We don't know exactly what took place on these events. If, as some suggest, those gathered would eat and drink and recall together special events in the life of the dead person, this custom would have some similarities with the Lord's Supper. But if the purpose of the meal was to mourn and comfort each to mitigate the sense of loss, this would clearly have no relation to the Lord's Supper. The Christian symbol is a memorial, a feast, a celebration, an act of worship, an expression of gratitude. We do not mourn during the Lord's Supper neither do we live a sense of loss, because we are participating in the presence of the living resurrected Christ! (Matthew 18:20).

The Lord's Supper and the Passover Feast: More importantly, Christ chose the Passover feast as the setting for the first symbolic supper. The disciples prepared for the Passover in an upper room, and "while they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave

thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat, this is my body'. Then he took the cup..." (Matthew 26:19-29). The Passover feast and the Lord's Supper have interesting similarities: The first Passover meal was eaten by the Israelites on the night before they left Egypt. A lamb without defect was killed (in the Lord's Supper we recall that Christ, the perfect Lamb of God, was killed). The lamb's blood applied to the door frame gave protection from judgement (we receive forgiveness because of the blood of Christ). The meal also marked a sovereign act of deliverance (the death of Christ has freed us from slavery in the kingdom of darkness).

Christ and His redemptive sacrifice stands at the historic centre of these two symbolic acts: The Passover viewed Christ's redemptive work as a future event, and the Lord's Supper now views it as a past completed event (1 Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 9: 28).

Jesus the Bread of Life: After the feeding of the 5000, the Lord Jesus and his disciples made their way to Capernaum. The next day the crowd found them and joined them in the synagogue. The story is found in John 6:25-59. The Lord knew that their prime desire was to get more free bread to eat. They wanted physical satisfaction. But the Lord's desire was to awaken spiritual consciousness in them and lead them to find completeness and satisfaction in Christ. "Do not work for bread that spoils", He said, "but for food that endures for eternal life" (vv 26, 27). He then compared himself with the manna, the bread that God miraculously provided to feed the Israelites in the desert (vv. 31, 32). Jesus was calling them to come to Him and receive eternal life. Then Jesus added "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (v.53). Was Jesus here referring to the Lord's Supper? (eating the bread and drinking from the cup?) Probably not. Although the same words are used (eat, drink, body, blood), the context is very different. Notice that the effects of this eating and drinking are those connected with **conversion**: he will live forever (vv.51, 58); without it he will have no life in him (v.53); by eating and drinking he has eternal life and will be resurrected (v.54); he will have a relationship with Christ (v.56); he will live because of Christ (v. 57). Participating in the Lord's Supper does not cause these blessings. These are conversion blessings.

In this chapter (John 6), it is more natural to understand the words "eat and drink" as equivalent to the other terms Jesus used in this passage: "come to me", "believe in me", and "looks to the Son" (vv. 35-40). We come to Christ once for salvation. We then "feed on Him" daily to strengthen our spiritual life. This feeding in Him **includes** those moments we spend together around the Lord, worshiping Him and participating of the Lord's Supper. Our souls find their satisfaction in Christ, a process that yields strength, joy and satisfaction – the spiritual equivalent to what happens to our body when we eat a good meal.

Joy and Freedom in Worship: The Lord's Supper could have been designed as a "once only" event, like baptism. But knowing how we are, Christ chose a symbol that should be repeated regularly. If you have been a Christian for a number of years, you know how easy it is for Christ to lose that central place in our hearts. We can enjoy the blessings and slowly forget the One who blesses. We can get absorbed in work, studies and family life. Our passion for Christ can even be replaced with love for

doctrine or enthusiasm for some ministry. The Lord's Supper is a time set apart where Christ is central in our hearts and minds. In this time of relative stillness, the Spirit of God desires to rekindle love, gratitude and passion in the hearts of redeemed men and women. We choose to stop, to re-focus, to remember, to thank, to worship. During this regular symbolic act, there is freedom for every brother who feels moved by the Holy Spirit to lead the assembly in worship. When it is time to give thanks for the bread and the cup, the Lord may use any brother present. Has your participation in the Lord's Supper become cold and mechanical? Have you, dear brother, become spiritually passive during these events? The Lord wants to use you too! Worship is not limited by talent or age. It is a genuine expression of our heart.

Perhaps you are prone to be critical or judgmental of other people's participation during the Lord's Supper. May I invite you to turn your attention away from men and focus on Christ? You will never enjoy collective fellowship with Christ (which is the essence of the Lord's Table) when you focus on men. Perfect worship meetings require perfect Christians. The Lord knows that you and I are not perfect. It is because of Christ and His **grace** that he seeks, receives and enjoys the worship of our sincere and redeemed hearts. Relax! Pray! And let the Lord lead. Surely He can do it. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom", 2 Corinthians 3:17. Let's live this freedom. We know that the Father seeks worshippers that worship Him in spirit and in truth. The Lord Jesus enjoys having those He redeemed gathered around Him, praising, thanking and worshiping Him. God the Father is pleased. And we also need these moments in the presence of Christ to warm our heart and refocus our vision. And we need these moments regularly.

Practising the symbol

Can the fruit of the vine contain alcohol? Can the bread contain leaven? How often should we celebrate it? Who can take part? Can various cups be used? Although there are some differences among Christians, there is virtually universal agreement that this symbol should not be ignored.

The Emblems: The New Testament has two Greek words for bread: AZUMOS for unleavened bread and ARTOS for normal bread. The descriptions of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 and in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) all use the term for normal bread. The expression "Breaking of Bread" used in Acts 2:24 and 20:7 also uses the term for normal bread. Considering the historic connection between the Passover (in which no leaven was to be present) and the Lord' Supper, a congregation may decide to exclude leaven from the bread it uses in the Lord's Supper. But it will exceed Scripture if it insists on this practice. The "fruit of the vine" probably refers to grape wine, but grape juice also fits the description. Either will do. In some parts of this planet, bread and grapes are not available. Could alternatives be used? We recommend that these dear Christians should find two elements which come as close as possible to bread and fruit of the vine. But to arbitrarily choose alternative elements when the prescribed ones are available would be a distortion of the symbol.

When Jesus instituted this symbolic supper, he took the bread and said: "This is my body". These words should not be taken literally. The Lord Jesus was not suggesting he had two bodies, His incarnate body and another body held in his hands. Then, taking the cup he added: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" Luke 22: 19, 20. It would be more natural to understand these words figuratively, in the same way as when Jesus said "I am the light" and "I am the gate" (John 8:12; 10:7). The bread and the cup are used in this meal in a symbolic way.

When and How Often: What did Jesus say when He instituted this symbol? Luke recalls that Jesus said "do this in remembrance of me", Luke 22:27. In the gospels of Mathew and Mark, there is no mention of repeating the event. In 1 Corinthians 11 twice we find the "do this in remembrance of me" (vv. 24, 25), and twice the relative adverb HOSAKIS, translated "as often as" or "whenever" (vv. 25, 26). The other occurrence of this word is in Revelation 11:6, where the Lord's two witnesses will have power to do some miracles "as often as they want". From here we can safely conclude that the Lord's intent was that this symbolic supper should be repeated periodically, but the Lord chose not to specify how often. There is liberty.

The Lord Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Braking of Bread for the first time that Thursday evening when He was later betrayed. Initially, after Christ's resurrection, believers participated in this memorial meal very frequently, perhaps even daily. Today many congregations celebrate the Lord's Supper every month, every three months, and some once a year. On his way to Jerusalem, Paul stayed seven days in Troas. "On the first day of the week [Paul's last day at Troas], when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them... until dawn; then he left" (Acts 20:6-11 NRSV). On that Sunday at Troas, the usual event was to break bread; the special event was Paul's long discourse. This does **hint** towards a weekly celebration: literally "on the first day after the Sabbath", that is, Sunday. The fact that Paul continued preaching throughout the night, suggest that the Lord's Supper was still being celebrated in the evening. Could this weekly pattern at Troas be taken as representing general practice in the early church? Probably yes, since historic non-biblical records also support this weekly pattern.

In Acts 2:42 we learn that the early church "devoted themselves", "persevered" or "continued steadfastly" in the breaking of bread, giving it as much emphasis as teaching, fellowship and prayer. If a congregation today views the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a mechanical ritual they need to perform because it's in the Bible, they will be inclined to lessen its emphasis. If a congregation discovers, as did many Christians in the early church, the joy, strength and renewed passion of setting time apart to celebrate the symbolic meal while making Christ the centre of its attention, I think it will settle quite happily for something close to a weekly pattern.

Have you thought of this gathering and celebration from **the Lord's perspective**? Can you sense His joy, pleasure and satisfaction as some of those He died to redeem gather to remember and worship Him? Have you seen the spark of joy in the eyes of some elderly grandparents when their children and grandchildren gather together in their house for an anniversary meal? Happiness is shared by all! I sometimes think of those deep sad feelings expressed by Jesus while looking over Jerusalem "how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen

gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” Matthew 23:37. Are we willing to be gathered close to Him? Shall we give Him that pleasure regularly? In your experience, is the celebration of the Lord’s Supper a time of happiness and internal renewal or simply a Christian duty? True communion with Christ revives, restores and lightens the heart. The fact that we know He is happy, makes us happy. The joy of the Lord is our strength.

But should the pattern at Troas be taken as binding on all congregations everywhere? Probably not. A Biblical example should not be lightly dismissed. Examples can be suggestive. Yet it is incorrect and dangerous to turn examples into commandments. There may be good local reasons to change things somewhat. For example, in most Western countries, for centuries it has been more practical to celebrate the Lord’s Supper on Sunday morning.

The assemblies we work with here in Colombia follow this weekly pattern. But sometimes an assembly may additionally celebrate the Lord’s Supper at midnight, at the beginning of the New Year. The desire is to give Christ pre-eminence at the beginning of a new year. This day may or may not be a Sunday. Occasionally, when a saint has been sick and housebound for many weeks, the assembly would coordinate to visit the home and celebrate the Lord’s Supper in the afternoon or the evening. On such a Sunday, some of us would celebrate Lord’s Supper twice. These are Scriptural freedoms and must be exercised carefully. The setting must lend itself for a worthy act of remembrance. If it is celebrated in the assembly hall or in a home, the local assembly is still responsible for what goes on. These special events should be agreed and coordinated. Church order should still be maintained.

Who can participate? The Lord’s invitation to every born again believer is “Do this in remembrance of me”. Each local church must develop some practical mechanism to ensure that only true Christians participate in the Lord’s Supper. The local church should not allow a believer who lives in immorality or who “does not continue in the teaching of Christ” to partake of the symbol (1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 John 1:9, 10). Furthermore, to ensure that we participate in a worthy manner, we should encourage every believer to “examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup” 1 Corinthians 11:27, 28. In our fellowship we refer to these as the **moral filter**, the **doctrinal filter** and the **conscience filter**. The first two filters are the responsibility of the local church, the third is personal. Does your local church practice these filters? Is there dependence on the Lord for guidance as to who He would have participate? Let’s never forget that it is **the Lord’s** Supper.

F. SEXUAL DISTINCTION IN THE CHURCH

Since the days of creation, we notice that God has made two different sexes and wishes them to remain distinct. Unisex is not a divine concept. Our position as children of God destroys all social, sexual and nationality distinctions (Galatians 3:26-28). But while we are still on earth, some of these distinctions have their practical effects. In the sight of Christ, the slave and his owner had the same value, but outside of the church, the slave and the owner had their different responsibilities. For his own reasons, God has chosen to give men and women a different role in the home and in the church.

The apostolic letters to Timothy and Titus, called the Pastoral Epistles, contain practical instructions for church life. In 1 Timothy 2 we find 3 times the Greek word HESUCHIOS which means “quiet”, “quietness”. “Pray for kings and all those in authority that we may live peaceful and **quiet** lives” (v.2) “A woman should learn in **quietness** and submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over man; she must be **silent** (quiet)” (vv. 11, 12). This word describes the inner attitude, inner motivation, a characteristic of spirit or disposition. It is calmness and quietness arising from within. The apostle Peter also uses this word in making recommendations to Christian wives: “your beauty... should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and **quiet** spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight” 1 Peter 3:3, 4. The focus of this word is the internal.

The general context of 1 Corinthians 14 is clearly the church. In this chapter, we find 3 times the Greek word SIGAO which means “to be silent”. If someone is speaking in tongues and there is no interpreter, “the speaker should **keep quiet** (be silent) in the church” (v.28). “If a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should **stop** (be silent)” (v.30). “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain **silent** in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission as the law says” (vv. 33, 34). Comparing these three close references, the meaning of this word is quite clear. If there is no interpreter or if the spirit of God desired to use another brother, the one who was speaking should stop speaking. The women should not speak. In each case, it is expected that the required silence would go hand in hand with a correct inner attitude. Without this attitude, obedience to a command becomes “burdensome” (1 John 5:3). But the focus of this word is external.

Carnal Christian men may take pleasure in using such Scriptures to think themselves above women, to exploit these Divine directives for their own personal benefits. Spiritual Christian men sense their responsibility before God to provide healthy direction, to break out of their natural spiritual passive shell and lead.

Together with this sexual distinction, we have been given a symbolic action. Christian men should uncover and take the initiative in leading and teaching, and Christian women should cover. Sisters, together with all those who are not leading, can support, backup and thus encourage their male leadership (Hebrews 13:7, 17). All leadership needs support. The different role between sexes, together with the

symbol, does not reflect difference in value or intelligence, neither in capacity or spirituality. "In the Lord, however, the woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman" 1 Corinthians 11:11, 12. In the family and in the church, we need each other. An assembly that does not have procedures to consult, inform and involve its sisters is like a husband that does not consider and consult his wife. At best they will remain mediocre. Man and woman are not independent. And this applies also to the church.

G. COVERED - UNCOVERED HEAD

In 1 Corinthians 11 we find instructions about this third Christian symbol: men should uncover their head and women should cover theirs when they pray or prophesy. Without wishing to undermine the validity of this cover-uncover symbol, it is important to highlight some significant differences between this and the previous two symbols. Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper are mentioned many times and in different books of the Bible. The cover-uncover symbol is only addressed once, in 1 Corinthians 11. That in itself is not a problem, but it does mean we must be careful in our conclusions. If serious and studied Christians still have some differences on the details of the first two symbols, we must definitely study with precision and apply with grace this third symbol. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are directly related to Christ and His work of salvation, which are fundamental doctrines. It is evident that this third symbol is not at the same level as the first two, and yet, it is a Biblical symbol with a meaning. Like any other portion of Scripture, it is inspired by God and we should take it seriously.

If it helps, consider a \$100, \$50 and a \$10 dollar banknote. Each note is different, yet each is issued by the same Central Bank. Each is provided for general and "indefinite" use. Each is backed by the same national authority. We may be personally inclined to prefer the \$100 over the \$50 banknote, but there is no reason to dismiss a \$10 dollar banknote. Each has its function. It is no secret that in many quarters the third symbol has been dismissed or is heading for extinction. Therefore we explore this symbol in more detail.

The "uncover" part: In many secular cultures, men are expected to uncover as a sign of respect. It is considered rude if he retains a hat on his head while singing the national anthem, or after entering someone's house, a restaurant, theatre or most religious buildings. This ensures that most men will naturally uncover their heads in a church meeting, perhaps not so much out of obedience to 1 Corinthians 11, but out of not wanting to be rude. With this cultural motivation, the uncovering part of the symbol is still practised in most Christian congregations today.

The "cover" part: The symbolic act where women cover their head during a church meeting used to be common practice in virtually all Catholic, Protestant and Christian Orthodox congregations. During this last century, especially from the 1960's onwards, this symbol became less and less used. This change has been felt more in some cultures than in others. Today the Christian women who cover their heads are in a minority. It is quite possible that the social pressure exerted by the women's liberation movement has affected our Christian mindset, making us feel uneasy with the biblical distinction between men and women. I suspect that bigoted male dominance and exaggerated arbitrary limitations even among Christians has fuelled this strong reaction. This changing cultural background makes it difficult for us in this third millennium to approach this third symbol in a truly open-minded way.

In some cultures, like in parts of Africa and in Moslem countries, it is common practice for women to cover their heads in public. In these, the cover-uncover symbol

requires less explanation and is more readily accepted. In fact, the danger there is for sisters to cover without knowing why they are doing it.

As to the observed process of change, one has the impression that initially the cover-uncover symbol is laid aside, and then, as a second step, the apostolic instructions which this symbol represents are also laid aside. Before we follow this trend, we must ask ourselves: Do these steps lead us closer to or away from the intent of Scripture?

Some Observations on 1 Corinthians 11

As we have already noted, this is the only chapter that addresses the cover-uncover symbol. As you study it, seeking clarity in your own mind, you may find the following observations useful:

- a. Was it simply something cultural? Did the cover-uncover have some social significance among the habitants of Corinth when these instructions were given? As you may have discovered, historians and experts have expressed many divergent ideas. The fact that the apostle asks his readers “judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?” (v.13) does suggest that to cover or to uncover did have some recognizable significance in that culture. Today it is common practice for Jewish men to cover their heads in synagogues for reading, prayer and saying blessings. But this is a relatively new custom which was not practiced at the time Paul wrote the letter to Corinth (v.4). Many films and children’s story books are mistaken on this point. As to the temple, the Law of Moses required that priests should have their heads covered when they served the Lord (Exodus 28:4). Early in church history, we read that “a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). For these men, Paul’s instructions to uncover as they prayed and prophesied must have been culturally uncomfortable. Perhaps some of these were among the “contentious” lobby! (1 Corinthians 11:16). The cover-uncover symbol, as described by the apostle Paul, is more than an adaptation of what was socially correct.
- b. How does Paul support its practice? The cover-uncover symbol and the sexual distinction which it represents has as its root a doctrinal rather than a cultural argument. God did not create man and woman simultaneously. He chose to create man first and then the woman. In other words, what the apostle uses to motivate the different role of men and women in the Church and its symbol is God’s order in creation (vv.8, 9). He does not use a social or a cultural argument such as “it feels right”, or “ladies chat too much”, or “we don’t want to shock outsiders”. A similar doctrinal argument is given in 1 Timothy 2:11-14, which is also in the context of instructions for the church (1 Timothy 3:15).

Some biblical instructions are rooted in culture. When the culture changes, the outward expression of an instruction may also change. For example, in Romans 16:16 we read “Greet one another with a holy kiss”. Note that there is no doctrinal support for this **holy kiss**. It is a cultural expression of a doctrinal directive on “brotherly love” Romans 12:10. Here in Colombia the only men who kiss each other are the openly homosexual. As Christians we express brotherly love

definitely not with a “holy kiss” but with an enthusiastic handshake and occasionally with a hug.

- c. Were the instructions only for Corinth? All the teachings in this letter to the saints at Corinth are also addressed to “all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”, 1 Corinthians 1:2. If we accept the punctuation in most translations, we would read in 1 Corinthians 14:33, 34: “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches”. The conclusion follows fairly naturally, that the male-female order, together with its symbol (and the other instructions in the Corinthian letter), were given for general application, the same as baptism and the Lord’s Supper. From Paul’s concluding remarks, we get the impression that in early days this topic also generated some controversy among believers: “If anyone wants to be **contentious** about this, we have no other practice – nor do the churches of God” (v. 16).
- d. Could the covering be the long hair? God created both men and women and wishes them to remain different. Longer hair for women and shorter hair for men could be understood as one of many distinctions. Verse 15 states “But long hair is given to her as a covering”. From this, some conclude that long hair is the covering referred to earlier in the chapter. But 1 Corinthians 11 contains two different Greek words with the idea of covering: KATAKALUPTO used 5 times in verses 5, 6 (twice), 7 and 13. And PERIBOLAION used once in v.15. The choice of a new word in verse 15 suggests that the apostle wished to mark a difference between the covering and the long hair. This suspicion is confirmed when we notice that: [a] Long hair is defined as a woman’s glory (v.15), the covering is a sign of authority (v. 10). [b] Longer hair is a life style issue, the covering is a symbol to be used during certain situations (vv. 4, 5). [c] If long hair is the covering, we lose the symmetry of men taking something off and women putting something on (vv. 4, 5). [d] If long hair is the covering, verses 5 and 6 would have a somewhat unnatural meaning, since they would read something like “If a woman does not have long hair, she should have her hair cut off”. The long hair and the covering are two distinct things.
- e. Who benefits from this symbol? As we eat the bread and drink from the cup we are remembering the Lord. As we are plunged into the water, we live the drama of dying and being buried with Christ, and being raised to a new life. In these symbolic acts our physical senses are involved. Who benefits from practicing and observing the cover-uncover symbol? In 11:3 the apostle teaches that “the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man”. The words translated “woman” and “man” can also be translated “wife” and “husband”, as is done in Titus 1:6. Translators rely on the context to decide which to use. From this husband and wife perspective, the cover-uncover symbol would be a visible sign that God’s order in family life is taken seriously (and not only while the symbol is being used). This interpretation would benefit the **family** unit. An American friend recently pointed out, “a distortion of the symbol occurs when a woman wears a covering in the assembly, but wears the pants at home!” From the church perspective, which is the natural context of 1 Corinthians 11, when a sister is covered, she is again reminded of her distinctively supportive role in the assembly meeting. When men are uncovered, and see the sisters covered, they recall their
-

own responsibility before God. Therefore **brothers** and **sisters** both benefit. But, there is more, an angelic perspective. “For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head” (v.10). Somehow the Lord is teaching something to the **angels**, who silently witness our church activities (Ephesians 3:10; 1 Timothy 5:21).

- f. How does it symbolize authority? In verse 10 the cover is referred to as a sign, a token or a symbol of “authority on her head”. Historically v.10 is associated with v.3 which reads “the head of the woman is man” and it is then concluded that the cover is a sign that she is under the headship and authority of man. It is true that in the church, the woman is under male headship, but does the cover necessarily represent that relationship? The word **authority** in verse 10 is a translation of the Greek word EXOUSIA, which can be translated anything between “has permission”, “ability or strength” to “power of rule”. It is used nearly one-hundred times in the New Testament expressing various forms and degrees of authority, but always used actively in the sense as having authority or acting with authority. The words of the Roman Centurion are the two exceptions, where he says “I myself am a man under authority” (Matthew 8:9 and Luke 7:8). In these two cases the preposition UPO (under) is added. It is possible that the word **authority** in verse 10 suggests that the cover is a symbol that shows the angels that the woman is under authority, has received authority, and is acting with that delegated authority. For example, the hat of a policeman identifies him as a man under authority and acting with authority. This does not mean that a sister can exercise authority in the church for this would conflict with the submission and silence directives (1 Corinthians 14:34) and the prohibition to teach or to exercise authority over man (1 Timothy 2:12). But if this interpretation is correct, it would suggest that the sister should, perhaps primarily, cover her head when she is actively and audibly praying or prophesying. But before we take this as conclusive, it should be noted that the term “sign” or “token” or “symbol” used in this verse (v.10) is an added word, not present in the Greek text. Literally the verse reads: “Therefore the woman ought to have authority on the head because of the angels”. This textual ambiguity leaves open the possibility for alternative interpretations.
- g. Was it simply Paul’s idea? The apostle Paul used the word “instructions”, “traditions” or “teachings” (11:2) before describing all the following: the cover-uncover symbol (11:3-16), the Lord’s Supper symbol (11:17-34), the order in the use of spiritual gifts (12:1-14:25), and who and when someone can speak during church meetings (14:26-40). The apostle then ends this section affirming that “what I am writing to you is **the Lord’s command**” (14:37). Could the apostle find any stronger language? In other words, “take what I have just finished writing seriously. Submit to it. Don’t change it. Don’t ignore it. Practice it”. The verse stamps the authority of the Lord Jesus on the preceding teachings. The clear danger is to use the apostle’s strong statement to press or promote our particular interpretation or practice on the above topics. Only what is written is “the Lord’s command”. Anything else, however noble, however practical, however deep in our collective practice, are personal customs, personal preferences and personal convictions. We must learn to distinguish and humbly submit to Scripture. Only Scripture. All Scripture.
-

Practising the symbol

The only verses we have of which to define the practise are these: “Every man who **prays or prophesies** with his head covered dishonours his head, and every woman who **prays or prophesies** with her head uncovered dishonours her head – it is just as though her head were shaved... for this reason, and for the sake of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head... Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to **pray** to God with her head uncovered?” 1 Corinthians 11:4-13.

Can we change the symbol? Some suggest that since the cover-uncover symbol no longer communicates to our modern culture, we should seek to express that same reality in a more relevant way. The suggestion is not to change the church order, but to find a more recognizable symbol that would differentiate men and women and express the idea of order and authority in a way that current culture can understand. It is true that we must constantly update our language, our hymns and our evangelistic and teaching methods to reach successive generations. But there are some basic difficulties in trying to update a symbol: **[1] We would lose universality:** since the world has such varied and changing cultures, every setting would find its own new symbol. We would end up with hundreds of symbols! **[2] More changes:** are baptism and the Lord’s Supper readily understood in our current culture? I suspect not. If we change one symbol, how would we justify not replacing the other symbols? **[3] Examples of change:** We have already noted the divine displeasure when some tried to tamper with God-given symbols in the Old Testament. **[4] Most symbols require explanation:** once a symbol is understood and accepted, it bounces back to life. Could it be that the main problem with the cover-uncover symbol is not the symbol itself but the order and limitation it represents? If we replaced the cover with a nice attractive “badge”, would that stop some sisters from leading and preaching in churches? If we allow the male believer to wear his hat, and replace his uncovering with “different coloured badge”, would that make him more proactive in prayer and prophesy? I suspect not.

When to use the symbol? We read in 1 Corinthians that it is dishonouring for a man when he “prays or prophesies with his head covered” (v.4) and dishonouring for a woman when she “prays or prophesies with her head uncovered” (v.5). Serious Christians then ask questions such as: is this praying and prophesying mental or audible? Does it include singing? Is it personal or public? Does it apply during church meetings or also at home? Does it apply when we pray at work, on the street, while driving a motor bike (with a helmet), while lying in bed? Does it apply when we answer “spiritual” questions in common social conversations? Does it apply when a sister teaches Bible lessons to children in the assembly hall or in a secular school? Should the symbol be used when we actively “pray or prophesy” or when we are listening to others “pray or prophesy”? Is listening to prophecy the same as prophesying? Does the cover-uncover symbol apply when listening to a Christian radio or TV programme? Or when reading the Bible or a Christian book?

For some questions we find very clear statements in Scripture. On other issues, Scriptures are not so clear. There are some areas, where the Lord has chosen to give complete freedom. But, clearly, for our own behaviour, we need to make some

decisions on the questions above. To act continually tormented by doubts and uncertainty is neither healthy nor pleasing to the Lord (Romans 14:22, 23). If we don't think these issues through, our behaviour will simply reflect preferences, reactions to frustrations, religious upbringing or the practice of those around us. You have my sympathies. These issues are not easy. But the Lord can guide and give us peace.

The "always" position: Some sisters, considering the injunction to "pray continually" in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, have chosen to have their heads covered all the time they are awake or whenever something that could be called "spiritual" happens. Their male counterparts would never use a hat. They wish to "be safe". They are free to do so, but the fact that the restrictors "prayer" and "prophecy" are explicitly mentioned in the text, works against this "always" interpretation.

The "never" position: Much has been written since the 1960's to justify this currently popular "never" position. Perhaps you have also read some. We have dealt with some of the key arguments above. It looks very unlikely to me that we can claim to be true to the natural intent of Scripture if we choose to dismiss the cover-uncover symbol completely.

The "in-between" position: If the intent of Scripture is not "always" and not "never", the desired practice must be found somewhere "in-between" these two positions. What I have noticed is that it is simply impossible to find an intermediate position that calms all spiritual and educated consciences.

Some models: Some congregations, to avoid ignoring the symbol completely, encourage the use of the covering only during the Lord's Supper. In some quarters, sisters cover only during prayer. Others also cover when they sing to the Lord (which is a sung prayer) and when they sing doctrine or testimony songs (which could be classified as prophesying). Such would cover and uncover several times during a meeting. Other sisters only cover when they are audibly "praying or prophesying", for example, when they themselves are leading prayer or teaching in a children's Sunday school class or in women's meeting. Some suggest that "praying and prophesying" is another way of saying "when the assembly comes together" and use the cover-uncover symbol only during church meetings.

Armenia model: The assembly our family currently forms a part of started in a living room about 6 years ago. After growing we moved to a rented garage and now are blessed with our own hall. At a very early stage we considered the question: how should we acknowledge the existence of this cover-uncover symbol? Our practice is to encourage sisters to cover and brothers to uncover during the main assembly meetings (Acts 2:42), that is, during the Lord's Supper, prayer meeting and Bible study meeting. We would not consider events such as weddings, funerals, anniversaries and evangelistic events in homes as assembly meetings. To take into account the "prophesying" aspect of the instruction, sisters are also encouraged to cover when they teach children in the Sunday School and when they lead, teach and pray in their Wednesday afternoon sister's meetings. If, for conscience sake, some sisters wish to use it on other occasions, no problem. If, for some reason, a sister forgets to bring her cover to the Bible study meeting or a female visitor arrives without her cover or a male visitor walks in with a hat or cap, we welcome them gladly. We

consider it a transitional matter and pray the Lord may bless them through the study of His word.

Is the Armenia model the “perfect” solution? What do you think? I am sure some sincere and educated Christians consider this model too free and flexible. Others consider it unnecessarily restrictive. Having followed this debate for a number of years, I am convinced of two things: (1) the intent of Scripture must be an “in-between” position, and (2) a perfect “in-between” position doesn’t exist. Some “in-between” positions are easier to defend than others, but every position is open to some degree of valid criticism. We must learn, therefore, to be honest before the Lord and live with a degree of tension. Maturity will also include a level of tension as we seek to love and not judge those who sincerely differ somewhat from our own conclusions.

H. CONCLUSION

It is very evident from Scripture that our Lord God has chosen to use symbols and symbolic acts to teach spiritual realities, to help visualise concepts and to help us remember instructions and important events. We have explored three symbols designed for the Christians: Baptism, the Lord's Supper and the act of covering and uncovering.

If the Lord Jesus, as head of His Church, has chosen to give us such symbols, it would not be correct to despise or simply set them aside. We notice that Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, Sikhs and people of other faiths feel comfortable, even proud, as they use their symbols or engage in their symbolic acts. Why shouldn't Christians? If it is wrong to ignore a Christian symbol, it is also wrong to over-emphasize them, ascribing special powers or giving them a degree of importance which is not supported in Scripture. The essence of Christianity does not rest on its symbols. We use them out of obedience, not because they are indispensable. As Christians, "we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code", Romans 7:6.

In closing, it may be helpful to quote two verses out of their context: "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind", and "Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves", Romans 14:5, 22. Try to work through these issues with your local church leadership. Use your Biblical insights to influence, and not to enter in conflict (Hebrews 13:17). I have worked with many new Christians who do not want to be baptised or do not feel attracted to the Lord's Supper. In time things change. Where Scripture is clear, the Lord desires child-like obedience. But convictions take time and can't be imposed. To pressure change in spiritual matters may cause short term results at the price of long term shallowness or bitterness.

The force of our teaching should focus primarily on the practical reality of living in communion with Christ. This will safeguard us against a legalistic, inflexible, ritualistic approach to Christian symbolism. The purpose of Christian symbolism is to complement, to illustrate, to reinforce, to help remember... not to enslave. Christianity belongs to a new dispensation; it rests on a new covenant. **In the Christian faith, the internal reality of communion with Christ is infinitely more important than any outward form or symbolism.**

APPENDIX

Other Possible Christian Symbols

Now that you've devoted some time considering the use of Christian symbols, you may wish to explore a few other possibilities. Let's recall that a **symbol** is a tangible thing or a physical procedure that has been chosen to represent something else. With symbols, the visible is used to express something abstract, absent or invisible. So far, we have considered three of these: Baptism, the Lord's Supper and the cover-uncover symbol. Yet in the New Testament, we observe the presence of a few other things that could be considered symbols and symbolic acts. The following candidates do not carry the weight of being instructions given by our Lord Jesus neither are they anchored in a set of apostolic commands, yet they are there. Here I simply wish to mention the ones I have observed (perhaps you may find some more) and start you off with a few observations.

For each potential symbol we should be asking: (1) Is this a genuine symbol? Or is it a figure of speech (like Peter's keys), a cultural expression (like the holy kiss) or an illustration (like the marriage relationship). (2) Is the symbol something local and restricted to one culture or to a particular time in history? Or is it something that could be considered timeless and universal, something that could continue everywhere. (3) Is the symbol private and personal or for collective expression? (4) Is the use of the symbol mandatory? Or is its use suggested, useful or simply optional.

Before we proceed, here is a word of warning. The focus of symbols and externals can have some real dangers. Our Lord Jesus highlights the first danger: seeing the heart of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, He noted that "everything they do is done for men to see" Matthew 23:5. The flesh within us likes it when others think we are "spiritual". Another danger is to feel so good about the "form" of our meetings and our private faithfulness to some symbols that we don't see that we are hindering the free action of God's Spirit. We can become like those who have "a form of Godliness" but deny its power (2 Timothy 3:5). Whenever there is a "form" without spiritual power, law will dominate. The use of symbols and externals will then become a manipulative tool to exert power over others. This is a third danger.

(a) Possible symbols associated with prayer

Kneeling in prayer: What position should we take while praying? Does it matter? In The Scriptures we find believers taking different positions before the Lord. When Elijah was praying for rain he "bent down towards the ground and put his face between his knees" 1 Kings 18:42. At the dedication of the temple, all the Israelites "knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord" 2 Chronicles 7:3. Seven thousand men were commended because their "knees have not bowed down to Baal" 1 Kings 19:18. The act of kneeling is clearly symbolic. It could be understood as a symbol of respect, humility, earnestness, total dependence. This meaning was still current in the New Testament times. Some knelt before Jesus seeking help (Mark 1:40; 10:17). When in agony at

the Mount of Olives, we read that the Lord “knelt down and prayed” Luke 22:41. Matthew adds “with his face to the ground” Matthew 26:39. Prior to crucifying Jesus, as a sick joke, the soldiers “falling on their knees, they paid homage to him” Mark 15:19.

After sending all the mourners out of the room where the dead body of Tabita lay, Peter “got down on his knees and prayed” Acts 9:40. We also find examples of collective kneeling. When Paul said good bye to the saints at Ephesus, “he knelt down with all of them and prayed” Acts 20:36. After seven days with the saints at Tyre it was time to move on. “All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray” Acts 21:5.

Keeling is not seen as a standard posture for all prayers. We read of some standing before the Lord (Deuteronomy 29:10-15; Marc 11:25), some with reverence even meditate and pray in their bed (Psalm 66:6; 1 Kings 1:47, 48). Neither do we find a directive or a command to kneel when praying. But the practice of this symbol is definitely evident in the New Testament church. Would you call it a Christian symbol? Should we encourage it at home and in assembly meetings?

Raising hands in Prayer: Being brought up in a Christian family, most of us are taught to pray with our hands together and eyes closed. Having four active children of our own, the usefulness of this man-made tradition is evident. It simply reduces external distractions. Yet when we become adults, the hands together and closing eyes usually continues! Do we find any alternative model in Scripture? When Jesus started his long intercessory prayer in John 17, we read “After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed” (v.1). When performing two miracles, we are told that Jesus spoke “looking up to heaven” (Mark 6:41; 7:34). Perhaps we should try it the next time we pray under the open sky.

But what about our hands? We recall that Moses lifted his hands a number of times. “I will spread out my hands in prayer to the Lord” Exodus 9:29. The psalmist sings “When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands” Psalm 77:2. And “I call to you, O Lord, every day; I spread out my hands to you” Psalm 88:9. “Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord” Psalm 134:2. David sang “I spread out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land” Psalm 143:6. “When Solomon had finished all these prayers and supplications to the Lord, he rose from before the altar of the Lord where he had been kneeling with his hands spread out towards heaven” 1 Kings 8:54. Ashamed and disgraced, Ezra tells us that “I arose from my self-abasement... and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the Lord my God and prayed” Ezra 9:5.

Sometimes the lifting of hands could be understood as a figure of speech, but in most instances it is a real physical symbolic act. What could this symbolic act represent? Perhaps it reflects dependence, openness to be examined, openness to receive, desire, expectancy. Is this symbol carried into the New Testament? Can it be viewed as a Christian symbol? It depends on how we understand Paul’s instruction to Timothy “I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing” 1 Timothy 2:8. If taken literally, we have an apostolic encouragement to lift up our hands while in prayer. If taken as a figure of speech, it could be used to

encourage to holy living in connection with prayer. Is this basis strong enough to encourage or forbid the physical spreading out or lifting hands in prayer?

Use of oil: In my Spanish Bible I found about 200 references to oil, with only about a dozen of these in the New Testament. Apart from its common domestic and cosmetic use, it is used symbolically in different ways. The first reference to oil is when Jacob pours some over a stone at Bethel (Genesis 28:18). This is definitely a symbolic act. It is used in many Jewish offerings. Samuel uses oil to anoint Saul and David king (1 Samuel 10:1; 16:13). It is also used as a picture of gladness. In the New Testament, it is used figuratively in the parable of the 10 virgins. Pouring oil on one's head was also a social "feel good – look good" custom. When fasting, Jesus recommended "put oil on your head and wash your face" Matthew 6:17. The Pharisee who invited Jesus into his home fell short of the ordinary marks of courtesy: "You did not give me any water for my feet... you did not put oil on my head" Luke 7:36-50.

Yet there are two other interesting references to oil: (1) **Mark 6:7-13** "Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits... They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them". Two observations: They anointed the sick with oil, not those with demons. Their miraculous mission did not include instructions on the use of oil. But they did anoint with oil for healing. Why? (2) **James 5:14, 15**. "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; and the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven". Two observations: Although prayer and oil are used, the healing is credited to prayer. Were these instructions only for Jewish Christians? The book of James, like the book of Hebrews, has been written for the whole Christian church. Jewish and Gentile converts are not treated differently within the church of Christ.

From these references, can oil be taken as a Christian symbol to be applied by elders on special occasions when saints are sick? Some see in both the Old and the New Testaments a relationship between anointing with oil and the working of the Holy Spirit, a similar relationship as that between baptising with water and salvation. The Holy Spirit and salvation don't depend on oil and water, but they go together. These would consider it appropriate to literally anoint the sick with oil as described in James 5.

Others would suggest that oil should not be taken as a Christian symbol. Why? Because oil was the common base for medicine in those days, thus these references to oil could also be understood as "they did what was medically possible to them and prayed. And the Lord answered their prayer". The Good Samaritan saw the injured man and "bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine" Luke 10:34. We find a similar medical use of oil in Isaiah 1:6. This is a very possible interpretation, yet it has its weakness: Is it reasonable to expect the Twelve in Mark 6 and the elders in James 5 to have available different kinds of medicinal oil to anoint sick people suffering from different sicknesses? Does James 5 suggest that elders should prepare themselves to pray and to give out medicine? Are these interpretations firm enough to promote or totally forbid the symbolic use of oil when praying for the sick?

Laying on of hands: We find references to this practice in both Old and New Testaments. Perhaps these references may be grouped in **two categories**. (1) Situations where the laying on of hands is used for something miraculous. (2) Situations where the laying of hands is a symbol of association, fellowship, delegation or identification. In the Old Testament, most references fit into the second category. For example, in many sacrifices Aaron and his sons would lay their hands on the head of the animal thus identifying with the animal. Sometimes the elders of the community would do it, identifying the Israelite community with the killed animal (Leviticus 4:13-15). Those who heard a man blaspheme would “lay their hands on his head, and the entire assembly is to stone him” Leviticus 24:14. When it was time for Joshua to succeed Moses, “he laid his hands on him and commissioned him.” Numbers 27:23.

In the New Testament we find both categories. In the first **miraculous category** we read that Jesus “laying his hands on each one, he healed them” Lucas 4:40. The apostles, on occasion, also laid hands on others. Sometimes some would then received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17-19; 19:6) and sometimes some would be healed (Acts 28:8). In the second **symbolic category**, we read that the apostles delegated responsibilities to seven chosen men. “They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them” Acts 6:6. The church at Antioch commissioned Barnabas and Saul, their first missionaries. “So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off” Acts 13:3.

In some references, it is not clear if the “laying on of hands” is used literally or figuratively. For example, we read that something happened to Joshua because Moses laid his hands on him (Deuteronomy 34:9). Something happened to Timothy because the church leaders laid their hands on him (1 Timothy 4:14), and again (or was it the same situation?) something happened to Timothy because Paul laid his hands on him (2 Timothy 1:6). In each case the effect was improved effectiveness in ministry. Were these “laying on of hands” literal followed by a miracle? Where these “laying on of hands” symbolic (representing delegation) followed by mentoring and training? Or should we understand these references to “laying on of hands” as a figure of speech representing fellowship, team work, mentoring and delegation? Those who wish to dismiss this topic as a simple cultural curiosity should take note that “laying on of hands” is classed among doctrines in Hebrews 6:2. For those who wish to practice it loosely, we have the injunction “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others” 1 Timothy 5:22.

(b) Possible symbols associated with diet

Fasting: The practice of fasting has been part of religious practice for thousands of years. It has been enforced, abused, ignored and even ridiculed. Throughout Scripture fasting refers to abstaining from food for some spiritual reason. Sometimes fasting was complete. In a time of crisis, Esther asked the Jews in Susa: “Fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day” Esther 4:16. Paul also did the same (Acts 9:9). Sometimes fasting was partial (Daniel 10:2, 3). Normally it involved abstinence from solid and liquid food, but not from water. The human body can’t survive much more than three days without water unless there is supernatural

intervention. Some may use fasting to improve their health, to draw attention to a cause or to gain a political advantage. The religious may fast trying to force God's hand on an issue. In each of these cases, fasting is viewed as a tool to accomplish a human purpose. Some refer to fasting as a discipline. It is. Yet, when properly used, it could be viewed as a symbol of devotion and earnestness in prayer.

Does Scripture discourage fasting? The Lord's complaint in **Zechariah 7** was not intended to terminate the practice of fasting, but to correct its motives. "When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?" (v.5). The Lord desired that if they ate, drank or fasted, He would be central (v.6). **Isaiah 58:3-10** is interesting because it deals with fasting in two ways: First (vv. 3-5) he deals with the physical act of fasting. Humility and not strife should be the context of prayer and fasting. Then (vv. 6-10) Isaiah uses fasting figuratively: "Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice... to set the oppressed free... to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter..." This is common in Scripture. Take, for example circumcision and the Jewish sacrifices. These were real physical symbols yet they were also used figuratively. The additional figurative use does not in any way invalidate its normal literal practice. The fact that fasting, circumcision and the sacrifices continued is clear evidence of this. Fasting is not forbidden in Scripture. But neither do we find a command to do it. Fasting is thus a voluntary symbol. But could it be called a Christian symbol?

Apart from fasting Himself (Matthew 4:2), the Lord Jesus includes some words on fasting in the Sermon of the Mount (Matthew 6). The teaching forms part of a family of three commonly practiced things, each starting with "when you": "When you give to the needy" (v.2), "When you pray" (v.5) and "When you fast" (v.16). He taught how to do these things properly. Although there is no command here, there is definitely a sense of expectation. But are these instructions for the Christian? The second key statement made by our Lord on this subject is an answer given to the disciples of John (Matthew 9:14, 15). If Jesus taught how to fast, why did his disciples not fast? They will, he replied. "The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast". Again, this is a statement of fact, not a command. It is no surprise then, to find the church worshiping, praying and fasting together on critical moments (Acts 13:2, 3 – note that fasting is mentioned twice), and read in Paul's testimony a reference to his (personal?) fasting (2 Corinthians 6:5 and 11:27 – note the difference between hunger [probably imposed] and fasting [voluntary] in 11:27).

In the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus encourages the private and hidden aspects of prayer and of fasting. In essence, both prayer and fasting are private matters between the individual and God. God hears our voice and sees our humble and earnest heart – expressed with the fasting symbol ("I will see it". Genesis 9:16 – God sees symbols). Judging by the biblical examples, if the motives are correct, prayer and fasting can also be practiced collectively.

Eating blood: In the beginning, God gave Adam and Eve all the plants to eat. Later, after the flood, in God's covenant with Noah, He broadened human diet by adding "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you", with the condition that "you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood" Genesis 9:3, 4 (NRSV). To this restriction

was added “fat” and coded into the Law of Moses. “This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live: You must not eat any fat or any blood” Leviticus 3:17. “But you must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water” Deuteronomy 12:16. This, together with the use of blood in sacrifices and ceremonies, ensures that blood has an important place among Jewish symbols. But is this symbolic restriction carried into the Christian era?

The Lord Jesus is silent on the issue. In fact, his metaphoric expression in John 6:54 “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” must have been quite a shock to the Jews. There was a fairly strong lobby of converted Jews who constantly tried to introduce customs taught by Moses into the Christian church. The apostle Paul persistently resisted such developments. The issue came to a head and was discussed by the apostles, elders and the church in **Acts 15**. Those who insisted that Gentile converts to Christ should be circumcised found no apostolic support. The recommendation from this meeting was: “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.” This four point list is mentioned three times (Acts 15:20; 15:29 and 21:25). The restriction on eating **fat** becomes non-issue in the New Testament.

Bible students have spent much energy reflecting on these 4 requirements. Could the “abstain from blood” be understood as “abstain from blood-shedding”? (killing?). Unlikely. Blood-shedding does not appear to be one of the issues in which the Gentile believers were hurting Jewish sentiment. Some are surprised to find an important moral issue like **fornication** listed together with the three ceremonial issues. It would be obvious that Christians should abstain from fornication. If it was not a point of controversy, why include it in the “Acts 15 letter”? These Bible students suggest that the reference to fornication should be understood as a requirement to abstain from all the unlawful sexual relations described in Leviticus 18. Apart from the obvious condemnation of adultery, homosexuality and bestiality (vv. 20, 22, 23), it also forbids situations like marriage with any close relative (v. 6) and sexual relations during a woman’s monthly period (vv. 6, 19). The ceremonial element in this chapter would also be of great concern to the Jewish saints. Do all these restrictions carry into the Christian era? Can a Christian marry his cousin? Let’s focus now on the blood issue.

Some Christians would say that the blood holds symbolic meaning for the Christian, and should not be consumed. The first prohibition was given to all mankind (Noah) before the nation of Israel and the Law existed. The prohibition is made before the Law, under the Law and after the Law. Therefore it is still valid. Furthermore, it is explicitly stated that the directive to “abstain from blood” was guided by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28, 29). This prohibition is plain and clear. Those who hold this view would accept the blood as a Christian symbol, probably representing life, the dignity of life. Some would say they don’t eat blood because it represents the blood of Christ. Can this be supported biblically?

A second perspective is given by those Christians who feel free to eat blood. They point out that Christianity is free from diet restrictions. The regulations of the written code have been cancelled. “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink... these are a shadow of things to come” Colossians 2:13-17. The freedom to

“eat everything” is also upheld in Romans 14 and 1 Timothy 4:3-5. How then do these Christians deal with the prohibition repeated three times in Acts? They would point out that in the book of Acts is a book of transition between the Jewish economy and the Christian era. They would view the “Acts 15 letter” not as a compromise (in the sense of sacrificing a moral or doctrinal principle) but as a recommended concession, a courteous and temporal restriction to cover a transition period. It was designed by the apostles and approved by the Holy Spirit to defuse a very delicate situation in the church. “The people read it and were glad” (Acts 15:31). The moderate requirements averted a major division. The only other time the “Acts 15 letter” is referred to is in Acts 21, again in the context of appeasing strong Jewish sentiment. Some point out that the “Acts 15 letter” is not addressed to all the churches everywhere but only to “the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia” (15:23), presumably where the tensions were high. Or was it because only saints from these three areas were present at the meeting?

The pattern of life for the Christian for all ages is described in the epistles. What is said in the epistles about these four points of the “Acts 15 letter”? (1) Abstain from sexual immorality as an important moral issue is restated a number of times (Romans 13:13; 1 Corinthians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:3). The ceremonial elements of Leviticus 18 are not repeated in the New Testament. (2) Abstain from blood and (3) abstain from meat from strangled animals (basically the same blood issue) became non-issues in the apostolic letters. They are simply not addressed. (4) Abstain from food sacrificed to idols is addressed in quite some details in 1 Corinthians chapters 8 and 10. “About food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing... we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do” (8:4-8). “Eat everything sold in the market without raising questions of conscience... eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if anyone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice’, then do not eat it” (10:25-28). Why not eat it? Not because of the restriction in the “Acts 15 letter”. The motivations are powerful love principles: “Nobody should seek his own good but the good of others” (10:24) and “Do not cause anyone to stumble” (10:32). This apostolic treatment of the food sacrificed to idols is in conflict with the directive in the “Acts 15 letter”, supporting the view that the “Acts 15 letter” was transitional in its intent.

A third group of believers would not feel bound by the “Acts 15 letter” but apply the powerful love principles also to the blood issue. They would eat everything without asking questions of conscience, but would abstain if someone said “this is made of blood” or if the supermarket label would read “this contains blood”. This makes very good sense if living in Muslim and Jewish surroundings or if you would hurt deep sentiments of the Christians your fellowship with. But what if you live where this is a “non-issue” and nobody is offended?

For those who wish to pursue this further, you can investigate what exactly happens in the slaughter houses of your country. In developed countries, Government agencies and animal right groups have useful websites. In other countries, we can go and have a look. In the West, animals are normally stunned and then their main arteries are cut or punctured. Blood will flow out as long as the heart is pumping. Jews and Moslems have their own variant methods. If the animal is hung upside down, gravity will also help a little. I have been told that it is impossible to extract all

the blood (don't worry, God also knows that!). If you don't want to eat blood in an absolute sense, the only option is to become a vegetarian. Is that the Biblical intent?

(c) Possible symbols associated with lifestyle

Length of hair: The hair is viewed in Scripture as a feature that gives honour and glory to a woman. The relative length of hair described in 1 Corinthians 11 (longer for women, shorter for men) are probably better classed as lifestyle issues that positively enhance gender differences. Not really symbols. In some ethnic groups, long flowing hair is a physical impossibility. Yet in every culture, it must be clear and evident who is a man and who is a woman. Hair length and or style may well contribute to this distinction. In Acts 18:18 we read that Paul "had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he ha taken". Later, in Acts 21:17-26, we read that the apostle Paul had his "head shaved" (v.24) before visiting the temple in Jerusalem. Here Paul was asked by James to identify with four other men under the Nazarite vow (Numbers 6). Not to do so, would deeply offend the consciences of "many thousands of Jews" who had believed in Jesus but were still "zealous for the law" (v. 20). The apostle's new haircut formed part of his adaptable strategy described in 1 Corinthians 9:20-23. Could we see here an example of giving up personal preferences for the sake of advancing God's purposes? Of course a Christian is free to shave his head, but we should not consider it a Christian symbol.

Washing feet: Feet are used figuratively in Scripture: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news" Isaiah 52:7. Sometimes taking off the shoes is a symbolic act of reverence, like when God told Moses: "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" Exodus 3:5. We find no evidence that this should be practiced by Christians. And yet, if a Christian assembly is established in a culture where respect for the presence of God is expressed this way, they may be wise in taking their shoes off when the church meets. Another interesting symbolic act taught by Jesus to the Twelve was "If people do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave their town, as a testimony against them" Luke 9:5. Later, He amplified the instructions when He sent out the seventy "When you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into the streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you'" Luke 10:10, 11. When being expelled, Paul and Barnabas also "shook the dust from their feet in protest against them" Acts 13:50, 51. Should we Christians practice this? In modern cities there is no dust to wipe off! Or was this simply a regional non-verbal form of communicating. Perhaps it could be considered as part of their language, something that will need translation when carried into another culture. One thing that is very evident from these passages is that is was normal to get your feet dirty. Hence the social need to wash the feet when entering a home. For the lessons associated with Jesus washing his disciples feet (John 13) may I refer you to the main paper: the section on New Testament Symbols under part A: Our Lord likes to use Symbols.

Greeting kiss: We find about 50 references to kisses in the Bible. The act of Kissing is used in positive contexts (Genesis 28:10; Proverbs 24:26) and also in scenes of treachery and treason (2 Samuel 15:5, 6; 20:8-10; Luke 22:48). The kissing is an act

to show closeness and friendship. It is even used figuratively to this effect in Psalm 85:10 "Righteousness and peace kiss each other". The apostle Paul in 4 occasions writes "greet one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:26). The apostle Peter also writes "Greet one another with a kiss of love" 1 Peter 5:14. On saying good-bye to the apostle Paul, the Ephesian Christians "wept as they embraced him and kissed him" Acts 20:37. Are we Christians required to kiss one another? Could this be considered a Christian symbol? Is it simply a cultural expression of brotherly love?

Some would say that five references by two key apostles is enough reason to make kissing compulsory. Others view the kiss as a particular way to show affection in a particular culture. In each of these five references, the kiss is simply mentioned with no doctrinal motivation to support its practice. When Jesus visited the house of Simon the Pharisee, He pointed out that Simon's hospitality fell well short of normal social expectations in three areas: (1) Simon did not provide water to wash their feet; (2) he did not kiss them on arrival, and (3) did not anoint their heads with oil (Luke 7:44-46). In Colombia none of these customs are used. In fact, only the openly homosexual men kiss in public. With this cultural background, should kissing be encouraged? Should it be forbidden to protect the testimony of the assembly? We express our mutual love and affection with a warm enthusiastic handshake and occasionally with a hug. But in countries or areas where one or more of these three customs is still used to express warmth and friendship, there would be no reason not to practice them literally.

Clothes: The New Testament does have clear references to clothes (1 Timothy 2:9, 10; 1 Peter 3:1-6), but, in contrast to the clothes prescribed for Jewish priests, the Christian's clothes are not symbolic. These passages connect clothes with important attitude and testimony issues: modesty, decency, propriety, purity, etc.

After God made Adam and Eve, He made clothes for them to cover their nakedness. Nakedness is viewed in Scripture as something intimate and personal. Angels are also clothed (Matthew 28:3, Revelation 15:6). We even find references to clothes in heaven (Revelation 3:5), where we shall have glorified bodies, where there shall be no sexual distinctions, and where we shall be free from sexual temptations. Are these figurative or symbolic references to clothes, like the clothes of Joshua in Zechariah 3? Do these references help us understand God's view of clothing?

In each culture, men and women have a recognizable and distinctive way of dressing. Christians should also uphold these local gender distinctions (Deuteronomy 22:5, a principle maintained in 1 Corinthians 11). By choice God made two different sexes and it is very evident that He desires a man and a woman to be externally different within each culture. Can my clothing be a stumbling block to others? Does that matter?

Holding firmly to these unchangeable Scriptural principles, (1) can applications vary geographically? That is, can one way of dress be approved of by the Lord in one country, region or tribe but not approved of by the Lord in another? For example, do converted Indians in the Amazon have to dress to our standard of "decency" before being approved by the Lord? (2) Can applications vary according to situations? That

is, can a certain dress code be acceptable before the Lord in one setting but not in another? For example, are there some situations where a Christian would displease the Lord by wearing football shorts or a swimming costume? And (3) Can applications vary in time? That is, can one way of dress be approved of the Lord in one generation and disapproved of the Lord in a later generation? (Or the other way round). For example, the use of gowns (those used by the apostles) or ties (those used in secular business circles) by men and nylon tights or trousers by women? Can women's trousers still be classed as male clothe items today?

Once you've thought about these clothe issues, you may wish to extend you study to include male and female ear-rings, piercings and studs (in nose, tongue, etc), tattoos, lipstick and makeup. Can female ear-rings and makeup be considered an extension of their dress? We find ear-rings mentioned in a negative context (Genesis 35:4; Isaiah 3:18, 23) and in a positive context (Proverbs 25:12; Song of Solomon 1:10, 11). Here in Colombia we often use Leviticus 19:28 to discourage the use of tattoos (But what about the previous verse 19:27?). Can we find guidelines on all these issues in the New Testament? Some would say that we are made in the image of God, and that to use things like lipstick, makeup and hair dye (or hair perm) shows dissatisfaction with the way God made us. Using the same line of thought, wouldn't the use of perfume or deodorant show dissatisfaction with the body odours God gave us? Would a man that daily shaves show daily dissatisfaction with the hairs God put on his face? Would you advice against an operation to correct a birth disorder? What about cosmetic surgery?

Every culture has hair styles and dress forms which distinguish men from women. Some externals express reverence while others express rebellion. The Lord looks deeper: "The Lord does not look at things the man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the **heart**" 1 Samuel 16:7. "All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but **motives** are weighed by the Lord" Proverbs 16:2. Females can wear ear-rings to enhance their femininity or to flirt with the opposite sex. Males may wear ties and jackets to show respect for an event or to enhance their personal power over others. The way you dress and why you dress are both important. After the Gadarene demon-possessed man had a freeing encounter with the Lord Jesus, we find him "dressed and in his right mind" (Mark 5:15). Should encounters with Jesus today also change our mind and dress?

I have noticed that these issues tend to become a very great concern to two type of people: The **legalist-traditionalist** Christians (who are trying to force themselves and others to live by an external set of rules) and to **shallow self-centred carnal** Christians (who desire to be "in" among non-Christians and live primarily to please themselves). These are constantly asking "but what's wrong with..." rather than "what is good about...". They strive to walk as close as possible to the edge without falling off rather than looking up and striving to climb as high as possible! If we could grow in passion towards the Lord Jesus, many of these issues would become so secondary. Paul shared his heart when he said "For me to live is Christ" Philippians 1:21. And this Christ-passion affected him externally: If it advanced the cause of Christ, he would not hesitate to shave all his hair off. If it advanced the cause of Christ, he would stop eating meat. If it advanced the cause of Christ he would give up food and sleep. He was willing to be flexible with his likes and preferences in order to advance

the cause of Christ. How flexible are you? To my mind, this lies at the core of the lifestyle issues. To hunt through old dusty books or to surf the World Wide Web hunting for verses and arguments to defend the use of your tie or your nose ring (or to prove that those who use these secular artefacts follow the world) will lead to spiritual stagnation. This is not a “don’t study” comment. Neither is it an “externals don’t matter” comment. If we focus on the internal, the external will slowly fall into place. When Christ truly rules the heart, He changes the life.

(d) More possible symbols

Circumcision: This God given symbol is clearly for the nation of Israel. Some tried unsuccessfully to introduce this symbol into the Christian church, teaching “Unless you are circumcised... you cannot be saved” Acts 15:1. Paul strongly resisted this legalist pressure (Galatians), yet circumcised Timothy “because of the Jews who lived in that area” Acts 16:3. This also formed part of Paul’s strategy to reach the Jews with the gospel. Of course a Christian is free to be circumcised on medical grounds, but we should not consider it a Christian symbol.

First day of the Week: We know that God created the universe in six days, and He rested on the seventh. This pattern of rest on the seventh day, called the Sabbath (Saturday), was imposed by law on the nation of Israel. The special observance of the Sabbath with its list of things you “can do” and “can’t do”, became one of the distinctive signs of the nation of Israel. Our Lord Jesus resurrected on the first day of the week, shifting the Christian focus from the Sabbath to the Sunday. It is on this first day of the week that the Christian church normally met to remember and worship their Lord (Acts 20:7). Soon it was called “the Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10). Can the Christian Sunday be considered the equivalent to the Jewish Sabbath? Can we extract some of the Sabbath rules given to Israel and apply them to the Christian Sunday? Sunday is the only market day in many small rural villages here in Colombia. Are Christians free to do their weekly shopping on that day? “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” Romans 14:5. Can this verse be applied in some way to the first day of the week?

The meeting room: There are many symbols associated with the construction and the ceremonies carried out by the Jewish priests in their temple. The construction was magnificent, the priest wore special robes, there was incense. Does any of this carry over to the place where Christians meet to pray and worship? Is it necessary that the Christian meeting place inspire awe? Should it positively not inspire anything? We are told that there were sections in the temple where only the priests were allowed to enter. Other parts were only Jewish men (and not Jewish women) were allowed to be. There was a geographical limit to how far a Gentile could approach. Does any of this carry over to the place where Christians meet to pray and worship? Do we have Scriptural support to insist on any particular seating arrangement? In a place a Christian place of worship, can some seats or areas be out of bounds for some men, for sisters or for non-Christians? Should we ascribe to the meeting place any symbol status?

In the gospels we read that Jesus visited the temple and the synagogues. In the book of Acts, we read that Christians, presumably mainly Jewish believers, met daily in the temple courts and broke bread in their homes (2:46). Peter and John went to the temple to pray (3:1). They would preach in the temple courts (5:19, 20). They also made use of the synagogues, but these remained Jewish and not Christian synagogues (13:5). The apostle Paul would use these mainly as platforms, places to meet God-fearing men and women to preach and debate with them (17:1, 2, 10, 17; 18:4). Once we move into the epistles, the Christians have distanced themselves from the temple and the synagogues and the churches are meeting in homes (1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). In fact, we don't find any specially built Christian meeting rooms in Scripture. How do we justify building them today? The fact that they met in homes, limited the size of the local church. Is that significant?

The dignity and the sense of occasion occur while the Christians are gathered together, be it in a home or a hall. God views the group of Christians as a temple, and Jesus promises His presence when they gather in His name (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17; Ephesians 2:21; Matthew 18:20). But once they have dispersed, what happens to the meetings room? Can it be used as a bedroom for visiting saints? Can it be used for a wedding meal? Can it be used for an evangelistic table tennis tournament? Is it acceptable for an assembly meet in a rented shop, restaurant or school gym?

The Bible: It is fairly common in Colombian Catholic families to have a fairly large Bible open on Psalm 91 on a nice stand in the living room. Most would feel that it has some positive effect on family affairs. It probably would if they read it, but it just stands there. Some recommend placing a Bible on the chest of an unconscious demon possessed person while praying for him. Of course we should handle God's word (the book) with dignity and respect, but it can become a superstitious symbol.

In some Christian areas, believers can become excessively attached to a particular translation of the Bible, sometimes even dividing congregations over this matter. Their preferred translation has become a symbol of orthodoxy. This is a battle fought among the privileged saints that happen to have more than one translation to fight over! Even today there are more than two thousand ethnic groups that don't have one Bible translation in their language. Unless we understand Hebrew and Greek, we should make use of a number of translations. Of course accuracy in translation is very important, but there is no such thing as a literal translation of the Bible. By comparing one translation with another, we can get closer to the meaning in the original language. If you can read the Bible in more than one language, that will also help. There is no short cut to the hard work of exegesis.

Next time you get into one of those "which translation" debates, you may enrich it by introducing the popular question "What would Jesus do?" Our Lord Jesus quoted from the Old Testament and He also had before him alternative options: [1] The Hebrew text, called the Masoretic text, which was the best for accuracy (since most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew). [2] The Greek text, called the Septuagint, a translation from the original Hebrew version (we are told it is a fairly good translation, but not excellent). [3] The Aramaic texts, called Targums, are short parts of the Old Testament written in the popular colloquial language. These would

be similar to paraphrases. Which of these three sources did Jesus quote from? Palestine, in Jesus' days was multilingual: Hebrew would be the Jewish religious language, Latin the Roman legal language, Greek the cultural and commercial language and Aramaic the popular street language. Our Lord Jesus quoted from all three sources. This explains why some of the Old Testament quotations in the New Testament differ somewhat from what you find in the Old Testament. Why didn't Jesus use only the most accurate version? What lessons can we learn from this?

FINAL WORDS

A good number of issues covered in the appendix could be classed as “disputable matters”. What is disputable and what is not can also be disputed. If nothing else, I hope this appendix has helped you realise that some issues are not so simple, and that the faith, understanding and conscience of your fellow brother or sister (who may be stronger or weaker than you) can lead to a different external behaviour than your own. They, like you, are God’s servants. And when a matter is disputable, “who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls” (Romans 14:1, 4). Of course, because of our backgrounds we all feel more comfortable with a particular permutation, and it is very healthy and normal to share and explain our perspectives.

Perhaps combining the following verses from the first letter to the Corinthians provide a good direction for our future: “Do not go beyond what is written” (4:6) – lets be careful not to insist on what is not clearly stated in Scripture. And “Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me, but I will not be mastered by anything... Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” (6:12; 10:23, 24). If you and I practice this, we help our local church to function more like a village hospital than a Public Notary office. Happy family-like atmospheres make growth and healing possible.