

Shibboleths

There are many things that we do without giving too much thought as to why we are doing them. At the same time, our unexamined habits have an influence on how we interpret the Scriptures.

That murky area between what we do mostly automatically, and the reason why we do those things, is inhabited by two concepts that rarely make it onto the radar of understanding: taboo and shibboleth.

Taboos act on behaviour either by suppressing what is socially unwelcome (a negative taboo), or by encouraging reverence for something that is valued (a positive taboo). Taboos, then, decide what is accepted and what is rejected based on certain *behaviours*.

Shibboleths control people in another way. Instead of being what is acceptable behaviour, they are about who is seen as an acceptable *person*. They are about quick judgements about who belongs and who doesn't belong based on outward appearance, or easily visible differences when it comes to habits, customs, or even the sound of their voice. Those people who fail the shibboleth test are outsiders, or even outcasts.

It's interesting to note that taboos are very difficult to change, and take many years to shift. Shibboleths can change quite quickly from decade to decade.

I. The Hair Shibboleth

A. The Old Covenant shibboleth

1. The identification of a proper Israelite

- a. Leviticus 19:27 What do you suppose is the purpose of this particular hair style for a man?
- b. Isaiah 7:20 What is the effect of what God is threatening to do to any Jew who does not submit to Him?
- c. 1 Chronicles 19:4-5 Just how important was the Israelite hair shibboleth when it came to man's place in society?
- d. Judges 13:5 How does this shibboleth identify a special category of religious leader?

2. The hair sacrifice shibboleth

- a. Micah 1:16 What message does a person give in old Testament times when they shave off all of their hair?
- b. Isaiah 15:2 What does this breaking of the shibboleth have to say about the state of the entire nation at this time?

B. The New Covenant shibboleth

1. 1 Corinthians 11:14-15 How seriously does Paul treat the hair

shibboleth?

2. 1 Corinthians 11:6 What message does it give to the community when a woman does not conform to the shibboleth?

II. The Clothing Shibboleth

A. The Old Covenant Shibboleth

1. In regard to religious identification

- a. Deuteronomy 22:12 How does this shibboleth identify individuals when it comes to their religious affiliation?
- b. Exodus 29:5 How does this shibboleth identify religious leaders?

2. In regard to a person's place in society

- a. Deuteronomy 22:5 What happens to the person who refuses to conform to this shibboleth?
- b. Proverbs 23:21 How did this shibboleth become a judge of character?
- c. Proverbs 31:12 What does this say about a person's character?

B. The New Covenant shibboleth

1. In regard to how people were treated

- a. James 2:2 How did the clothing shibboleth lead to unfair treatment in certain Christian congregations?
- b. 1 Timothy 2:9-10 What was the reason behind this shibboleth in regard to women?

2. In regard to status before God

- a. Matthew 17:2 Why do you think it was important to describe the clothing of Jesus?
- b. Luke 24:4 Why does it matter what they were wearing?
- c. Revelation 6:11 What does this clothing signify?

III. The Food Shibboleth

A. The Old Covenant Shibboleth

1. Leviticus 20:25 What kinds of things were the Israelites forbidden from eating?
2. Exodus 12:43 With whom were they not allowed to eat?

B. The New Covenant transition

1. Acts 11:1-3 How did the food laws identify a Jew?