



was used to discourage demons from entering a woman's mouth and possessing her. Even a custom as innocuous as covering the mouth while yawning may have arisen from the idea that one's soul could escape through a wide-open mouth. Over the years, however, the religious associations have faded, and today these practices and customs have no religious significance.

#### The Concern of Christians

When a Christian must decide whether or not to follow a certain custom, his main concern should be, What is God's viewpoint as expressed in the Bible? In the past God condemned certain practices that may have been tolerated in some communities. These included child sacrifice, the misuse of blood, and various sexual practices. (Leviticus 17:13, 14; 18:1-30; Deuteronomy 18:10) Likewise, certain customs that are common today are clearly not in harmony with Bible principles. Among these are non-Biblical traditions connected with religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter or with superstitious practices related to spiritism.

But what about customs that may once have been linked to questionable practices but that today are primarily viewed as social etiquette? For example, many popular wedding customs—including the exchanging of rings and the eating of cake—may have pagan origins. Does this mean that Christians are forbidden to observe such customs? Are Christians required to scrutinize meticulously each custom of the community to see whether somewhere or at some time it had negative connotations?

Paul points out that "where the spirit of Jehovah is, there is freedom." (2 Corinthians 3:17; James 1:25) God wants us to use this freedom, not as an inducement for selfish cravings, but to train our perceptive powers to distinguish right from wrong. (Galatians 5:13; Hebrews 5:14; 1 Peter 2:16) Hence, in a matter where there is no clear violation

of Bible principles, Jehovah's Witnesses do not create a hard-and-fast rule. Instead, each Christian must weigh the circumstances at hand and make a personal decision.

#### Seek Others' Advantage

Does this mean that it is always proper to participate in a certain custom as long as it does not directly violate Bible teachings? No. (Galatians 5:13) Paul indicated that a Christian should seek not only his own advantage "but that of the many." He should "do all things for God's glory" and not become a cause for stumbling. (1 Corinthians 10:31-33) So a person seeking God's approval would want to ask himself: 'How do others view this custom? Does the community attach any objectionable meaning to it? Would my participation imply that I am in agreement with practices or ideas that are displeasing to God?' —1 Corinthians 9:19, 23; 10:23, 24.

Though generally innocuous, some customs may be practiced locally in ways that are contrary to Bible principles. For instance, on specific occasions the giving of flowers may take on special meaning that conflicts with Bible teachings. So, what should a Christian primarily be concerned about? Although there may be reason to examine the origin of a particular custom, in some cases it is more important to consider what the custom means to people at the time and in the place where one now lives. If a custom has unscriptural or otherwise negative connotations during a particular period of the year or under certain circumstances, Christians may wisely decide to avoid it at that time.

Paul prayed that Christians continue letting their love abound with accurate knowledge and full discernment. By keeping a balanced view of popular customs, Christians "make sure of the more important things, so that [they] may be flawless and not be stumbling others." (Philippians 1:9, 10) At the same time, they will let their "reasonableness become known to all men."—Philippians 4:5.