

**What the Bible Says about...**

# ***Lobola***

**By Bill Scheidler**

## What the Bible Says about *Lobola*

### What is *lobola*?

*Lobola* or *lobolo* is a term that finds its origin in the Zulu and Xhosa languages. It is unique to Southern Africa and refers to an age-old marriage custom where a man pays the family of his fiancée for her hand in marriage. Other cultures have similar customs where they use different words to describe this practice (e.g. *mahandi* in Sesotho, *enjuugano* in Uganda). In some ways this practice is closely related to a more familiar practice found in many European and Asian cultures known as the “dowry.” The main difference between *lobola* and a dowry is that a dowry is normally paid by the family of the woman to the family of the man while *lobola* is paid by the man or potential groom to the family of the woman.

*Lobola* is sometimes translated as or referred to as “the bride price.” It is a term given to the process of determining and making the actual payment to the bride’s parents (especially the father) of that which is demanded or negotiated for the privilege of marrying their daughter. In the cultures where *lobola* is practiced it is seen as a solemn practice that would be a source of scandal if not properly respected.

Originally, when Southern Africa was principally composed of rural communities, *lobola* was always paid in commodities, particularly cattle which were the primary source of wealth in rural society. *Lobola* or the “bride price” was established in terms of a certain number of cows. While in many Southern African cultures this remains the practice, with the advent of urbanization and modern means of monetary exchange, *lobola* is more often than not paid in a negotiated cash amount.

Determining *lobola* is an extremely formal process that is often characterized by serious counsel from relatives (particularly the men) and negotiations between the parties involved. Traditionally the bride has no part or voice in the process. The process of *lobola* negotiations can be long and complex even when the parties involved have known each other for many years. In modern times businesses have even been established for the purpose of helping to assist in these negotiations.

The amount of *lobola* or the “bride price” is most often initially set by the father of the bride and is determined by a number of factors mostly relating to the bridal qualifications. The list of factors has evolved over time as women’s place in society as evolved. Initially, the list of factors was rather short. Subsequently additional factors have come into play. In today’s world some or all of the following factors relating to the bride-to-be help to determine *lobola*:

- Her perceived beauty and desirability
- Her age or youthfulness
- Her virginity
- Her fertility and potential for many children
- Her family’s status in their society
- Her education and the cost of her education
- Her career and earning capacity

The amount of *lobola* can also be affected by the wealth and status (i.e. the perceived ability to pay) of the family of the groom in this marriage union.

In traditional society, the fertility of the woman was a major factor to be considered since a man's power and wealth were often determined by the number of his offspring. There have been occasions where men have asked for a return of the "bride price" when a wife proved to be barren.

## What is the principle behind *lobola*?

Because the practice of *lobola* goes back centuries, the way it is practiced today has little resemblance to its original purpose or function in African society. As with most other cultural expressions, the *lobola* custom has evolved into something other than that which was intended.

Some of the initial purposes for *lobola* include the following:

*Lobola* was given...

1. To assist the new bride and groom set up their own house.

Originally, the money received by the bride's family was not to be used to enrich the bride's parents, but it was used to help the young bride set up house.

2. To be a gesture of appreciation and gratitude by a bridegroom to his future in-laws for looking after and bringing up the young bride well.

By giving the parents a gift at this time he was demonstrating his thankfulness for the investment that the parents had made in their daughter to make her "marriage ready." This would have included protecting her, educating her and teaching her the practical things of life that would make her a good wife and mother.

3. To be a symbolic gesture in bringing the two families together and fostering mutual respect.

In traditional society, the marriage was not just about a man and woman coming together as one, it was about increasing the extended family to include members of both the bride and the groom's clan.

4. To demonstrate that the man was capable of supporting his wife financially and emotionally.

Traditionally women were very financially dependent on men. *Lobola* was one of the means by which the parents of a young bride could ensure that the man was financially able to take care of her and a family. A wealthy man was often characterized by many wives, many children and many cattle. The payment of *lobola* ensured that a man had to be able to afford

the wife or wives that he had. The general acceptance of polygamy ensured that a man could have as many wives as he could afford.

5. To determine the potential groom's sincerity regarding marriage.

Just like the purchase of a wedding ring is in Western society, the willingness to pay *lobola* was a demonstration that the groom was very serious about his intentions. Traditionally, the couple was not to have a physical relationship of any kind until *lobola* was paid. Parents would not be interested in a less-than-serious suitor for their daughter.

6. To demonstrate the seriousness of marriage as a covenant relationship.

The custom of *lobola* was not just about the exchange of a few cattle. It often involved lengthy (extending over days) and serious negotiations. No matter how well one family involved may have known the other family involved prior to this event, *lobola* agreements were always done in person and concluded with a written and signed document. There was never a sense that this arrangement was anything but a lifetime arrangement. The thought of a married couple being divorced was a totally foreign concept. However, it must be said that the practice of polygamy opened the door for additional wives at some point in the future.

7. To compensate the bride's parents for the bride giving up her maiden name to assume the husband's surname.

In most of the western world there is equity in the way marriage is seen in that the parents of the bride are seen to be "gaining a son" and the parents of the groom are seen to be "gaining a daughter." In traditional society, however, the bride was actually seen to be leaving her parents house and family and becoming officially a part of the groom's family.

8. To compensate the bride's parents for the loss of their daughter's contribution to their family welfare.

There is no question that ancient rural African society was a male-dominated society where women were considered as servants to the needs of men. It was not uncommon for a father to comment in his *lobola* negotiations, "Who will take care of me in old age?" The implication of this statement is that this would have been one of the functions of the daughter that he is now losing.

As has been noted, the practice of *lobola* was not reciprocal in that the bride-to-be did not pay *lobola* to the parents of them groom. To be sure the bride-to-be could equally give an expression of thanks to the groom's parents for raising a proper son. However, this distinction had to do with the fact that in traditional African society, the offspring that came forth from this marriage relationship would be seen as belonging to the man and the man's family and not the woman or the family of the woman. The payment and acceptance of *lobola* established the husband and his extended family as the rightful "owners" of all of the offspring that would come from this relationship.

## **What are some current pressures that come to bear on the custom of *lobola*?**

Traditional African society has been greatly influenced by the Western world. Through modern media, travel, urbanization and increased educational opportunities the traditional cultures are blending with modern trends and tendencies. This has had an effect on many aspects of culture including dress, diet, role relationships, language and general family life. It has also had a significant influence on the practice of *lobola*.

In traditional society children stayed with their parents until they got married. In modern times it is not uncommon for children to go off to school and to even move away from their parents to live on their own before they are ever married.

In traditional society children worked together with other family members to provide a living for the wellbeing of the extended family. In modern times it is common for young adults to enter the job market and pursue a career that is totally unrelated to what their parents have done.

In traditional society children were guarded from physical relationships with the opposite sex and sexual activity outside of marriage. Babies outside of marriage were extremely rare. In modern times because of the intermingling of the sexes and the independence of young adults in society at large, sex before marriage has become very common. In the traditional concept of *lobola* the man was presumed (in most cases) to be marrying “a virgin.”

In traditional society there was no thought of divorce as an option (polygamy was the option). In modern times most marriages end in divorce with children often in joint custody with each parent.

## **Does the Bible say anything about *lobola*?**

As with so many subjects that concern us in these days we do not find any specific instructions from the Bible in the area of *lobola*. We do, however, have a number of verses that shed light on this subject.

Obviously there was no *lobola* paid in the very first marriage of Adam and Eve unless you consider Adam’s rib to be the payment of *lobola* (Gen. 2:18-24).

It does appear that the equivalent of *lobola* is mentioned three times in the Old Testament and never in the New Testament (Gen. 34:11-12; Ex. 22:16-17; Deut. 22:29; I Sam. 18:25).

The first reference to *lobola* is found in Genesis 34. In this account Dinah, one of the daughters of Jacob and Leah, was sexually violated by one of the men of Shechem. He had a strong physical attraction to her and wanted to have her as his wife. He went to the family members and indicated that if she would be permitted to be his wife he would give them whatever gift they required in the form of a “dowry” (Gen. 34:11-12). This payment was not something that was

brought up by Jacob, but by the men of Shechem, who were not from the seed of Abraham, suggested it.

*Then Shechem said to Dinah's father and brothers, "Let me find favor in your eyes, and I will give you whatever you ask. Make the price for the bride and the gift I am to bring as great as you like, and I'll pay whatever you ask me. Only give me the girl as my wife." –NIV*

Dinah's brothers were horrified at the thought of their sister marrying a non-Israelite and tricked the men of Shechem into being circumcised prior to any such arrangement being made. When the men of Shechem agreed and were later incapacitated because of their surgery, Simeon and Levi, the sons of Jacob killed all of the men of the city, took their wives and plundered their goods (Gen. 34:25-31). Needless to say in this case *lobola* was never exchanged.

The second reference to the equivalent of *lobola* is found in Exodus 22. In this section of Exodus Moses is recounting the laws of God to the Children of Israel. Part of this law had to do with a man who might commit fornication with an unbetrothed virgin. If he did so, the man would be required to marry the girl and pay the father an appropriate dowry or "bride price" (Ex. 22:16-17).

*If a man entices a virgin who is not betrothed, and lies with her, he shall surely pay the bride-price for her to be his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money according to the bride-price of virgins.*

*If a man seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her, he must pay the bride-price, and she shall be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride-price for virgins. –NIV*

It should be noted in this instance that the actual "bride price" was most likely fifty shekels of silver which is alluded to in a later passage in Deuteronomy (Deut. 22:28-29).

*If a man finds a young woman who is a virgin, who is not betrothed, and he seizes her and lies with her, and they are found out, then the man who lay with her shall give to the young woman's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife because he has humbled her; he shall not be permitted to divorce her all his days.*

Fifty shekels would translate into about 18 troy ounces of silver. At today's prices that would be under \$300 US (Under R2500). It is interesting to note that the price of a slave was thirty pieces of silver (Ex. 21:32). Neither one of these amounts is very high when you consider the value of a person. Obviously, in the case of a woman, this was a token amount that had more of a symbolic function.

The third reference to *lobola* is in I Samuel 18 where King Saul wanted to give his daughter Michael to David as a wife. Saul made this offer for all of the wrong reasons thinking that his daughter would become a problem for David and make him more vulnerable to the attack of their enemies. However, David was pleased when he found out about it but was concerned about the fact that he was a poor man. The implication was that because he was poor he would not be able

to pay the “bride price.” At this point Saul indicated to David that the only *lobola* that he wanted was for David to slay 100 of the Philistines (personally, I would have rather paid the 50 shekels). Saul’s real motive in asking for this *lobola* was to put David in harm’s way where he would surely be killed. David, however, was not killed and went on to marry Saul’s daughter.

*Saul replied, “Say to David, ‘The king wants no other price for the bride than a hundred Philistine foreskins, to take revenge on his enemies.’” Saul’s plan was to have David fall by the hands of the Philistines. When the attendants told David these things, he was pleased to become the king’s son-in-law. So before the allotted time elapsed, David and his men went out and killed two hundred Philistines. He brought their foreskins and presented the full number to the king so that he might become the king’s son-in-law. Then Saul gave him his daughter Michal in marriage. I Samuel 18:25-27, NIV*

In addition to these specific references, we have a few instances that might shed additional light on the subject of *lobola*.

### **Eliezar gave gifts to Rebekah (Gen. 24:50-53)**

Abraham had sent his servant to seek out a wife for his son Isaac from among his own people group. He sent Eliezar with gifts in his hand that would later be given to the bride and her family. When he came to the city of Nahor, Rebekah was the fair young maiden who fulfilled the qualifications for the bride of Isaac. When Eliezar approached Rebekah’s mother and brother about becoming the wife of Isaac they agreed to let her do so. After the decision had been made, Eliezar gave gifts to Rebekah and also to her mother and brother.

*Then Laban and Bethuel replied, “The LORD has obviously brought you here, so what can we say? Here is Rebekah; take her and go. Yes, let her be the wife of your master’s son, as the LORD has directed.” At this reply, Abraham’s servant bowed to the ground and worshiped the LORD. Then he brought out silver and gold jewelry and lovely clothing for Rebekah. He also gave valuable presents to her mother and brother. Genesis 24:50-53, NLT*

While this action on the part of Eliezar has some similarities to *lobola* in that the bride’s family ended up receiving gifts, it has many more differences from *lobola*. In this case, no *lobola* was expected or requested by Rebekah’s family in exchange for the privilege of marrying the daughter. In addition, there were no negotiations in the matter of the potential marriage except determining if indeed such a marriage was in the will of God. And finally, the gifts that were given were given at the initiation of Eliezar and had nothing to do with demands set upon him by the family of the bride.

Therefore, Eliezar’s gifts to the family must be seen as a token of thanks to these people for their faith and generosity. His gifts to the bride must be seen as tokens of good things that would come when she would enter into the full possessions of the groom in marriage. Notice that all of the decisions by all parties regarding the marriage were made before any gifts were given.

### **Jacob served Laban for Rachael (Gen. 29:13-20)**

It is interesting that Isaac sent his son Jacob back to the same family from which he had obtained his wife Rebekah. He sent him to Rebekah's brother Laban who had been one of the recipients of the gifts that Eliezar had given at that time in relation to Rebekah (Gen. 24:29, 53).

When Jacob arrived he was immediately impressed by Laban's daughter Rachael whom he met at a well. Rachael did not know Jacob's intentions but she knew he was a relative and so she brought him to the house of her father. Laban welcomed Jacob warmly, invited him in and gave him accommodation. For the next month Jacob evidently worked for Laban and helped him with his flocks and herds. After a month had transpired Laban mentioned to Jacob that he should not be working for him without wages just because he was a relative and he asked him to name his price. Jacob told Laban that he would work for him for seven years and all he wanted in return was to have his daughter Rachael's hand in marriage. Laban agreed to this arrangement.

*As soon as Laban heard about Jacob's arrival, he rushed out to meet him and greeted him warmly. Laban then brought him home, and Jacob told him his story. "Just think, my very own flesh and blood!" Laban exclaimed. After Jacob had been there about a month, Laban said to him, "You shouldn't work for me without pay just because we are relatives. How much do you want?" Now Laban had two daughters: Leah, who was the oldest, and her younger sister, Rachel. Leah had pretty eyes, but Rachel was beautiful in every way, with a lovely face and shapely figure. Since Jacob was in love with Rachel, he told her father, "I'll work for you seven years if you'll give me Rachel, your younger daughter, as my wife." "Agreed!" Laban replied. "I'd rather give her to you than to someone outside the family." So Jacob spent the next seven years working to pay for Rachel. But his love for her was so strong that it seemed to him but a few days. Genesis 29:13-20, NLT*

This account also bears some resemblance to the practice of *lobola*. It relates to *lobola* primarily because there was a bride and a price attached to the bride. However, once again there are far more differences when compared to the modern practice of *lobola*.

In the case of Rachael, Laban did not set the bride-price. In fact, there is no intimation that he was suggesting anything other than paying Jacob a normal wage for his services which in most cases would have been a share of the livestock (Gen. 30:28-33). Jacob was the one who suggested that he serve for the privilege of marrying Laban's daughter.

Both of these stories reflect more on the Eastern custom where the woman or potential bride had very little to say about who she would marry. Both of these stories reflect the belief that daughters were under the authority of their parents, especially the father. Both of these marriages were arranged marriages that were set up by the parents or guardians.

At this point it is important to emphasize that when it comes to the stories of the Bible, just because the Bible records an event as it occurred, it does not mean that what occurred in the story is God's viewpoint on the matter. The Bible, unlike many religious writings, does not attempt to conceal the "humanness" of the characters involved. It records such things as the lying of Abraham about his wife Sarah (Genesis 20:1-11). This does not mean that God condones lying.

After looking at the above passages from the Bible, we must conclude, as we would with any other issue relating to cultural customs, that unless there is something about the custom of *lobola* that would violate a principle found in the Bible, *lobola* is not specifically prohibited by the Bible.

## Is there anything wrong with *lobola*?

So the question is, “Is there anything wrong with the practice of *lobola*?”

There are many objections to the practice of *lobola* by different groups of people. Perhaps if *lobola* was practiced today more like it was in its original sense or even in the biblical sense there would be fewer objections. However, as we have transitioned into modern times, this custom, as well as many other customs, has fallen into abuse.

Some of the most common objections to the current practice of *lobola* include the following:

1. Some feel that it demeans women and places them in the realm of a commodity to be bought and sold.

Unlike many religious texts, the Bible seems to place women on equal footing with men when it comes to value and standing before God (Gal. 3:28). In relation to marriage the man belongs to the woman and the woman belongs to the man (I Cor. 7:3-4). However, the Bible also establishes the man as the spiritual head of the marriage relationship (I Cor. 11:3). This is not done because the man has more value than the woman, it is done because marriage is not just about the couple itself but it is meant to be a model of Christ’s relationship to the Church (Eph. 5:31-32).

One woman who was frustrated with the modern practice of *lobola* compared it to a form of prostitution. This is what she said...

*Some aspects of lobola are downright sexist...When one observes the practice of lobola more closely, the differences between this practice and prostitution are few, indeed. The groom to be is begging for the bride to be to be his and his family’s possession.*

*In essence, he pays once for her sexual favours for the rest of his life, to bear children who will have his name, thereby ensuring his immortality...The only difference between this practice and prostitution is that the bride has only one client, her husband, whilst the prostitute has various clients. –Kazeka Mashologu kaKuse*

This woman has obviously put her views on the matter in extreme terminology. It must be said that while some women feel that *lobola* honors them, many more women it seems feel that it degrades them and devalues them.

Perhaps a greater concern in this area is the message that the man may come away with after the exchange of *lobola*. Some men apparently do see *lobola* as a purchase price for a

commodity that now belongs to them. As a result it can lead them to believe that since this woman belongs to them they can treat her any way they please. This creates a marital climate that is not conducive to trust and love.

In some cases this has led to spousal abuse where some misunderstanding men would use the fact that they paid *lobola* as an excuse to abuse and oppress their wives.

2. Some feel that its original intent of helping the bride set up house has become a way for parents to profit from this arrangement.

In some cases it appears that parents are now using *lobola* to pay off debts or secure their own futures, instead of that of the young couple. The price that is set for *lobola* is often more about how much they can get rather than simply a token of respect and gratitude.

As one person put it...

“The modern world has opened this once sacred custom to abuse and distortion. It has now been replaced by money-grabbing fathers and uncles, who care very little about life beyond the negotiations and the transaction.” –Kazeka Mashologu kaKuse

How much better it would be if the parents gave a significant gift to the couple getting married so that they could have a down payment on their first house. Instead *lobola* often takes what money the couple does have and returns them to poverty. This is not the best way for a young couple to begin their life together.

*After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.*  
II Corinthians 12:14, NIV

*Children shouldn't have to look out for their parents; parents look out for the children.*  
–Msg

3. Some feel that since *lobola* is no longer a token payment, but more often a substantial amount, it has created a financial barrier for those who seek to be married.

In most places where *lobola* is practiced there are high levels of poverty. In these cases, *lobola* is out of reach for a high percentage of the population.

This has created two problems. For those who are patient and wait in an honorable way for *lobola* to be paid, many end up waiting until they are fairly old and even past their prime years for having children and raising a family. It can also result in older men who have established themselves financially marrying much younger women for the sake of her ability to have children.

For those who are impatient and do not feel that they can wait, it creates a situation where the young man and the young woman simply move in together without marriage hoping to minimize expenses and save together to pay the *lobola* (I Cor. 7:9). Of course when they do

this they are sinning against God. So in order to honor their earthly father, they end up dishonoring their Heavenly Father.

Originally in rural society the young couple was often forbidden from meeting until the actual wedding ceremony. However, in today's world many couples live together without marriage hoping to eventually save up enough money to pay *lobola*. *Lobola* is seen by some as an extravagance that has little relevance in a society where young Africans are trying to lift themselves out of inherited poverty.

There is a danger for the tradition of *lobola* to become detrimental if it is abused. It can become one of those traditions that make the Word of God of no effect (See: Mt. 15:6; Mark 7:9).

When the Bible speaks of "tradition" it speaks of two kinds of traditions. There are good traditions and bad traditions. Traditions are seen by God to be "good" when they reinforce the truths of God's Word and assist people in their obedience to God. Traditions are seen by God to be "bad" when they detract or hinder people from their service and obedience to God.

### **Traditions can be good**

Paul indicated to the church at Thessalonica that there were some things that he had established while he was with them that were good and that would be helpful to them if they were going to be all that God wanted them to be. He encouraged them to hang onto these things because they brought life and they were consistent with the overall purposes of God. He told them to "stand fast" in the traditions in which they were taught (II Th. 2:15). In fact, Paul encouraged them to take special note of those who did not cooperate with those traditions (II Th. 3:6).

### **Traditions can be bad**

It is tragically possible for something to start out good but end up bad. In Israel's history we have an example of this. When they were in the wilderness God used a brazen serpent that was lifted up on a pole to bring life, health and deliverance to His people after being bitten by vipers (Num. 21:8-9). After that incident was over, the children of Israel kept this object to remind them of God's deliverance and faithfulness to them. So far, so good.

However, as time went by, this object which had been so mightily used of the Lord became a snare to them and an object of idolatry (II Kgs. 18:4-5). During a time of revival in Israel, Hezekiah had to break this idolatrous image in pieces. The people now needed deliverance from the thing that had been used to bring deliverance to them in the past.

Sometimes things that begin well can become a snare or something that actually hinders us from moving forward. Sometimes we need to quit doing some things that we have always done to make room for what God wants to do. Sometimes we cannot take hold of our present until we let go of something from our past. If we are to become all that God wants us to become we cannot worship the past. We have to be willing to examine our traditions and change them if they are hindering our progress.

I was in a developing country a few years ago for an extended period of time. While I was there I observed a tradition among several of the churches. Most of these churches were in the practice of celebrating communion on the first Sunday of the month. On this particular Sunday I also noticed that most the women in the congregation wore white dresses for their communion celebration. This had now become a tradition in these churches.

I am sure that when the first woman decided to wear a white dress for Communion Sunday her heart was in the right place. I am also sure that the others who followed her example were just as sincere. But unfortunately, as time went on and others followed suit, it became a real block and source of stumbling to many.

What had begun as a nice gesture of honor and reverence to the Lord had now become something that was detracting from the meaning of the Communion Table and was now dividing the Body of Christ. What happened eventually (because this was a poor country) is that women who were too poor to buy a white dress either stayed home on Communion Sunday or they came but felt unclean and embarrassed.

This tradition was now making the Word of God of no effect. The Communion Table was despised instead of anticipated, people felt dirty instead of cleansed, condemned instead of forgiven and separated rather than united. The purposes of God in the Table of the Lord were totally negated.

## **Is there anything right with *lobola*?**

When you study the historical origins of *lobola*, it is clear that most of what it represented could be seen in a positive light. Unfortunately, *lobola* has changed a great deal from its original intent.

There are a few things that are reinforced by the practice of *lobola* that have to a great extent been lost in much of the world today.

1. *Lobola* does acknowledge the seriousness of covering authority and marriage.

Many young people today think that when they arrive at a certain age they no longer have to be concerned about their relationship to their parents and parental authority. They feel that since they are seen as adults by society they no longer need to ask their parents for advice or seek their blessing in serious matters such as marriage. This is clearly not something that is taught in the Bible.

2. *Lobola* does affirm the covenant aspect and permanency of the marriage relationship.

Marriage today is treated very lightly and the vows that are made at the altar are often not taken very seriously. But in God's mind marriage is a lifelong covenant of relationship.

*You cry out, “Why has the LORD abandoned us?” I’ll tell you why! Because the LORD witnessed the vows you and your wife made to each other on your wedding day when you were young. But you have been disloyal to her, though she remained your faithful companion, the wife of your marriage vows. Didn’t the LORD make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are his. And what does he want? Godly children from your union. So guard yourself; remain loyal to the wife of your youth. “For I hate divorce!” says the LORD, the God of Israel. “It is as cruel as putting on a victim’s bloodstained coat,” says the LORD Almighty. “So guard yourself; always remain loyal to your wife.” Malachi 2:14-15, NLT*

## **What should the Christian’s attitude be toward issues of culture?**

While we are all interested in preserving cultural expressions, not all cultural expressions are based on divine principles. In some cases our very culture needs to be challenged by the principles of the Word of God. We cannot hang onto things just because that is the way we have always done them. We must allow our minds and our thinking processes to be renewed and ultimately conformed to the mind of Christ and His thinking process.

Sometimes missionaries have been criticized for trying to westernize African or South American cultures. With so much emphasis on the historical preservation of native cultures, some feel that it is terrible to tamper with these issues. I agree that we do not want to change culture for the sake of change. Nor do we want to ever promote the idea that one culture is superior to another. On the other hand, we do need to see our cultures redeemed. They still need to submit to the Word of God.

My contention is that there is a culture of the Bible that is universal. That is, whenever an individual or national culture comes into sharp contrast with a principle or precept in the Word of God, the culture itself will have to give way. Some things within the culture have no conflict with biblical culture. Often there is a cultural way of dress that is very unique and beautiful. No one wants to see that change. However, if the cultural dress is no dress at all, that culture will have to give way to the clear biblical guidelines regarding modesty and nakedness.

Cultural dancing can be the same. Some cultural dances may be totally harmless and community orientated by their very nature. Other cultural dancing may be inseparably tied to idolatrous rituals that evoke and seek supernatural encounters with a pantheon of demonic spirits.

I once heard of an ancient tribe who had virtually turned to the Lord as an entire village. When they would receive guided tours from the Western world, the various visitors would always ask to see some of their cultural dances. The missionaries would invariably encourage the native peoples to cooperate with the request. After a while one of the key leaders of the village confronted the missionary and asked, “Why do you have us perform these dances for visiting tourists? Don’t you realize these dances were part of our pagan religious practices? Don’t you realize that these dances were designed to open us up to the control of demonic spirits? Don’t you realize what a spiritual battle we face every time we do this?”

Needless to say, that was the end of that. Now I am sure that these dances were lovely and colorful. But they were part of a tradition that needed to die.

God does not take something away from us unless He intends to replace it with something better. However, if we are to receive the “better” we must hold loosely that to which we are clinging. The Word of God must be the screen through which all of our practices in the church are filtered.

How can we summarize our relationship to culture?

1. Christians should celebrate differences of culture.
2. Christians should be proud of their cultural heritage.
3. Christians should allow their culture to pass through the filter of biblical truth.
4. Christians should be willing to adjust their culture when there is a conflict with the demands of the Bible.

### **What can we conclude from this?**

The practice of *lobola* is neither specifically forbidden in the Bible nor is it specifically promoted. *Lobola* is a practice that can easily be abused as world cultures are more and more blended together. If *lobola* is to be practiced today it should be practiced in a way that supports its original meaning and that avoids the potential abuses. It should be practiced in as a ceremonial token rather than a debilitating sum of money that sets the young couple up for failure. It should be used to benefit the couple getting married to help them set up their new household as it was originally intended.

Parents are the ones who have the greatest power to change or redeem this practice. It would be difficult for a young person to try to challenge or adjust parental authorities in this arena. Parents who understand the times can begin new traditions that are honorable before God and man.