

Did Jesus Institute Washing Feet As a Church Ordinance or Ceremony?

Peter Ditzel

Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God; He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded. Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter. Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all. For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean. So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.

(John 13:3-17)

There are some churches and denominations that believe that in John 13, Jesus is instructing us to literally wash each other's feet as a church ordinance, ceremony, or ritual. They practice their belief by having a foot washing service associated with the Lord's Supper. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with doing this, but I don't think it was Jesus' intent. I want to show you why I don't think Jesus was telling us to literally wash each other's feet, and, more importantly, what He was teaching us.

Before I continue, I want to mention that I do not have a personal aversion to or prejudice against the observance of foot washing. I was a member for many years of a church that practiced foot washing, and if I were a member of a church now that did this, I would participate.

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It is a harmless practice, but I do not believe there is sound biblical evidence for doing it.

“Thou knowest not now”

In the ancient world, the lowliest servant was the one who washed feet. Therefore, Peter was shocked when he saw Jesus assume that position and wash the disciples’ feet. This did not fit his image of his Lord and Master, so he resisted and asked, “Lord, dost thou wash my feet?” Jesus’ answer is key to knowing whether we are to literally wash each other’s feet, or whether Jesus had something else in mind.

Jesus responded to Peter’s question by saying, “What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.” Now, what Jesus was doing was plain for all to see. He was washing the disciples’ feet. If Jesus had wanted to establish foot washing as an ordinance in the church, His answer to Peter could have been straightforward and simple. In fact, if Jesus had answered Peter with the words He used in verse 14 (“If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet”), and only those words, there would be a good case for believing that Jesus was instituting foot washing as an ordinance. But, instead, Jesus answered Peter by saying, essentially, You don’t understand what I am doing now, but you will know later.

If Jesus merely wanted the disciples, and us, to exactly follow His actions and ritually wash each other’s feet, why did Jesus answer this way? After all, He was simply washing feet. What was there for Peter to not understand?

Why Jesus Washed Feet

After Jesus answered him, Peter, with his characteristic rashness, responded with an outright protestation: “Thou shalt never wash my feet.” Although motivated by an earthly modesty, Peter’s answer was rebellious. Jesus then cut him to the quick by stating, “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.” The washing Jesus was here talking about was far more than an ordinance of foot washing. He was telling Peter that such lack of submission is characteristic of someone who has not received the washing of regeneration by His Spirit, and, therefore, someone who cannot be in fellowship with Christ.

Peter, probably not fully understanding what Jesus was saying, but hearing that his fellowship with Christ was threatened, swings in the

other direction and blurts out, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." Jesus then gives him reassuring words: "He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all." Peter is clean—regenerated, but his feet need to be washed. What does Jesus mean? In verse 11, John explains in an aside that not all twelve of the disciples were clean because Judas was a betrayer and not regenerated. But the big question is, In what way can we be clean in regeneration, but still need a part of us (our "feet") clean?

At the time when this incident took place, people wore sandals at best, and roads were either dusty or muddy and likely had animal dung on them as well. Therefore, even though a person may have just washed, even a short walk would get his feet dirty. Thus, it was common practice when someone came into a home to have a low servant wash his feet. This is the picture Jesus was basing His lesson on.

Just as a person could be completely clean, but get his feet dirty by walking along a road, so a born again Christian whom Jesus has spiritually cleansed can be "dirtied" by his walk in the world. Our feet, which are the part of our bodies that touch the earth, symbolize our day-to-day interaction with the world. Even though we have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus, we can still pick up "dirt" as we walk through the world.

By this, I mean that our minds get polluted by our interactions in this sinful world. For example, in just our ordinary lives without special trials, we may experience friction with others at work; perhaps we are even persecuted for our beliefs. We may hear a continual barrage of foul language. In our media-filled world, it is hard to escape the unceasing attempts to lure us into covetousness through advertising; the pornographic pictures on billboards, magazines, and just about everywhere; the vile music; and the discouraging news headlines. We may fret over money or other worries. It is difficult to live in this world without having our consciences violated in one way or another almost every day. This is the dirt that sticks to our feet. So, what is to be done?

For one thing, we should bring these concerns to God in prayer. But, as right and good as prayer is, it is not what Jesus has pictured for us by washing feet. He pictured an interaction between believers. Notice our text: "So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for

so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them."

Unlike the Lord's Supper, when Jesus told all of the disciples to eat and drink, here only Jesus performed the action of washing feet. Unlike the Lord's Supper, when Jesus said, "This, do in remembrance of me," Jesus here says, "For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you." The Greek word translated "example" is *hupodeigma*. Other New Testament uses of this word refer not to a command to be precisely obeyed but to a representation, figure, or pattern—such as a spiritual pattern to be represented physically, or an object lesson of either good or bad behavior (see Hebrews 4:11; 8:5; 9:23 [where *hupodeigma* is translated as "patterns"]; James 5:10; and 2 Peter 2:6).

I believe that Jesus, instead of instituting an ordinance, was setting an example of humility and service that Christians are to follow throughout the church age. And this humble service that we are to render to each other is specifically what cleanses us from the spiritual contamination of this world.

Have you ever entered an assembly of the saints feeling as though you were bearing the burdens of the world and left feeling freed from them? Maybe it is because of something you heard from one of the speakers. But it is as likely you were uplifted by some encouraging words one of the brethren said to you personally. You have had your feet washed. Have you ever been bedridden and had a brother or sister do your shopping? bring you a meal? clean your house? watch your children? or simply visit you when you were lonely? You have had your "feet washed." In fact, there are many ways we can "wash each others' feet." When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, He was merely giving one example among many possible ways we can serve one another.

Not a Special Good Work If Done By All the Saints

Further evidence that Jesus did not mean His example of washing His disciples' feet to mean that we should literally wash each other's feet is found in Paul's instructions to Timothy concerning widows. In 1 Timothy 5:9-10, Paul writes, "Let not a widow be taken into the

number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man, Well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work." Paul was telling Timothy that the church could take care of certain widows who would not likely want to remarry and would be willing to be put into a special group ("the number") who would dedicate their remaining years in service to the church. He specifies that these widows must have no family members to care for them (v. 3ff.), must be at least sixty years old, and must have a record of good works. Among these good works is washing the saints' feet.

If the apostolic church understood Jesus as meaning that we should literally wash each others' feet, at least each time the Lord's Supper is eaten (something that was done frequently—see Acts 2:42, 46), then all of the saints would have been washing each others' feet, including all of the widows. That being the case, this would not be an unusual service distinguishing certain widows so they could be included among those cared for by the church. Rather, Paul's use of the term, "washed the saints' feet," here is closely associated with "lodged strangers," since it was the custom to wash the feet of your guests. Paul may even have had Genesis 18:4 and 19:2 in mind when he wrote this (notice the similarity to Hebrews 13:2). It would have been a figurative way of speaking of the outstanding hospitality of these widows.

Ministering to One Another

Another section of Scripture of significance in this regard is 1 Corinthians 11ff. Paul here rehearses Jesus' instructions concerning the Lord's Supper. But he says nothing about washing feet.

In the twenty-first century, we have a tendency of compartmentalizing each area of life into the specialties of various types of experts. Thus, physicians take care of illness (with many specialties within this category), auto mechanics take care of cars, plumbers fix leaking pipes, and so on. This may be okay, but a problem occurs when we carry this thinking into the church and overdo it. Certainly, everyone is better gifted in some areas and not in others (see 1 Corinthians 12; 14; Ephesians 4:11). But Scripture tells us we are all to care for one another. It is not a specialty to be left to paid "clergy."

Notice in Ephesians 4:16 that Paul says that "every joint" is to work together to compact and join the body together: "From whom the

whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." In Galatians 6:2, Paul tells us, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." I think this is the type of service Jesus had in mind for us when He set us an example by washing His disciples' feet.

Here are a few more Scriptures that tell us how to "wash each other's feet": "But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13); "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16); "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently" (1 Peter 1:22); "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16); "And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve" (Luke 22:25-26).

This, then, is the "footwashing" that I believe Jesus wanted us to perform for one another, and this is why I believe that Jesus did not mean to institute a ceremony of literally washing feet.