

Foot Washing: An Act of Humility

by Ray Straub

At this time of year, when thoughts turn to the Last Week and Last Supper of Jesus' life, it is appropriate to comment on the interesting, oft-debated passage concerning the washing of feet. It is found in John 13:1-17. Foot washing is appropriately called the "ordinance of humility."

The Passover *seder* was the last meal Jesus and His disciples ate together before His crucifixion. Jesus rose from supper, laid aside His garments, took a towel and basin of water and began to wash His disciples' feet.

The washing of the feet of guests was a traditional gesture of hospitality usually done by a servant or slave. It would be too undignified for the host to do this. It is likely that neither Jesus nor the disciples had their feet washed when entering the upper room, because none of the group regarded himself to be the servant of the others. It may be this circumstance which prompted Luke to report, "But there was also rivalry among themselves, as to which of them should be considered the greatest" (Luke 22:24).

For Jesus, the Master, to assume this role of a slave apparently caused an awkward situation for the disciples. Peter didn't want Jesus to wash his feet. He may have had difficulty seeing the Messiah perform this lowly task of a servant. Jesus warned, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (John 13:8a).

That turned Peter's attitude 180 degrees. Suddenly, he was enthused about being washed by Jesus.

What shall we do with this passage? Many simply dismiss it. They feel that Jesus' actions belong to His own culture. They reason that His considerate gesture is appreciated from a historical perspective, but since our culture practices neither the washing of feet nor having slaves, there is no present application. The incident gives insight into Jesus' love and

humility, a memory to cherish. No more.

Others feel differently. They suggest that Jesus was introducing a new ordinance which was meant to be part of the observance of the Lord's Supper.

I would like to reason in favor of the latter position, that it remains appropriate to wash feet as part of the Communion. Consider the following three points:

1. When Jesus introduced the washing of feet to His disciples, He was not merely observing a tradition. It is true that the slave's washing the feet of arriving guests was hospitable, but Jesus was not expressing hospitality. He was teaching an important lesson in brotherhood. Brotherhood is an essential part of the Lord's Supper. He wanted to demonstrate humility, a quality which some years later was sadly lacking in the church of God at Corinth.

Note Jesus' words after He returned to His place at the table: "Do you know what I have done to you?" (John 13:12a). Apparently, the disciples did not. Had Jesus performed a routine courtesy, there would have been no question about the meaning of His kindness. The disciples did not understand Jesus' insistence upon washing feet. This indicates that something new was introduced.

2. In washing the disciples' feet, Jesus gave an example which He specifically asked them to follow. He said, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14, 15).

In contrast, the routine washing of feet done in Jesus' day was an act of voluntary courtesy, no obligation. I cite two events which specifically indicate this. The first was at the Passover *seder*. This was one of the Jews' more prominent and formal celebrations. If it would ever be appropriate to have feet washed to demonstrate personal courtesy and concern, it would be on an occasion such as this. Obviously, feet had not been washed.

There was no obligation to do so.

Second, Jesus, on another occasion, received an invitation to dine at the home of the Pharisee, Simon. While host and guests were eating, a sinful woman entered with perfume. She stood behind Jesus, weeping all over His feet, and she wiped His feet with her hair. The Pharisees present became uneasy. The conversation which followed made it clear that Jesus' feet had not been washed, either upon or after entering the home. The change from option to obligation suggests that Jesus was initiating an act to be performed by His disciples which was distinct from the bygone cultural tradition.

3. Note the special benediction pronounced on those who do what Jesus asked. He concludes His comments about foot washing by saying, "If you know these things, happy [or blessed] are you if you do them" (John 13:17).

Is such a beautiful promise being offered to those who enact a traditional cultural courtesy? Probably not. Jesus was not seeking to improve the social etiquette of His followers in order to get them to be better hosts. He was giving them a lesson about their relationship to each other. Christians must learn how to serve each other in the lowliest of tasks.

Humility and equality exist only in their expression. Aside from their being demonstrated, they remain theoretical and fanciful, not actual.

Have you ever washed the feet of a fellow believer? If so, you know what it is to experience humility.

Have you ever had your feet washed by a fellow member of God's family? If so, you have an even keener feeling about the cost of humbleness.

Do you feel a bit squeamish about participation in washing feet? If so, no act would do you more good!

Take it from those who practice it. It works! Humility needs more than kind thoughts. It exists in deeds. Those who practice foot washing know that what Jesus was promoting is equally meaningful and effective in any age and culture.

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