

FOOTWASHING

With the Churches of God, footwashing has been an ordinance with the church since its beginning when instituted by Jesus at his last Passover meal. It is a custom that has a very significant meaning to it and some churches question as to when it should be held during the Lord's Supper observance. Some claim it should be held before the Lord's emblems, while others claim it should be held after the emblems. In this study, we will examine what the act of footwashing represents, why it should always be performed during the Lord's Supper observance and other aspects of this custom, including its timing during the observance of the Lord's Supper.

Jesus had asked his disciples after washing their feet and sitting down, "***Know ye what I have done to you?***" John 13:12. Most people would not understand what Jesus was asking. Jesus was asking his disciples if they knew the meaning of the act he had just performed. It was not important when the footwashing was performed, whether before or after the emblems, but the important thing was the performance of this act of humility itself. One can perform the act repetitiously, following it customarily, or the person can be performing it with the conscience of equality and humbleness of wanting to demonstrate service to one's brother or sister in the true love of unity. The custom of washing the feet was a Middle Eastern custom that existed long before Jesus instituted the rite of foot washing with the emblems of the Lord's Meal.

It was not only a Jewish, but a Middle Eastern custom to take off one's sandals when entering a home. It was necessary because a person would sit with their feet beneath him, and if they had their sandals or shoes on, it would soil the rug or mat. The washing of the hands also started for sanitary reasons as the main food was usually in a common dish, often as a sop of which each person's hand would be thrust into the common dish. The act of the washing of the guest on entering a host's house was an act of both respect and refreshment. It was also a custom of hospitality to supply guests or a stranger with food and water. It soon became a defilement to enter any sacred place and not remove your footwear or to wash one's feet, especially in connection with the sanctuary services. "***And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.***" Exodus 3:5; "***And the captain of the LORD'S host said unto Joshua. Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy. And Joshua did so.***" Joshua 5:15; "***For Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet thereat: When they go into the tabernacle of the congregation, they shall wash with water, that they die not; or when they come near to the altar to minister, to burn offering made by fire unto the LORD: So they shall wash their hands and their feet, that they die not: and it shall be a statute for ever to them, even to him and to his seed throughout their generations.***" Exodus 30:19 to 21. With the Jews, the feet were considered unclean in a religious ceremonial way; they were not considered honourable members of the body, therefore for someone to touch another person's feet would be the supreme act of humility. Jesus demonstrated to his disciples the act of being meek and humble and to serve in love one another in brotherhood. "***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? You 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 13:12 to 17. Here we have the man who is the Christ

of God, the highest honour given to any man, and he humbled himself to show his unfeigned love for his fellowman, not allowing his position to make himself look superior to his disciples. So if he, being the Son of God, can perform this act of humility to his disciples, then shouldn't we be able to do the same to one another who are all equal in the brotherhood? Who are we that we should not wash one another's feet?

Returning back to the Jewish attitude of the feet being an unclean member of the body, the Jews removed their shoes or sandals and washed their feet before entering into a host's house, in fact, all Middle Eastern peoples followed this practice. This custom took place because of the dust and the sand crystals that would gather on a person's feet and footwear from the hot dry climate of this Middle East region, and the most common footwear of the people were open sandals. *"And he said, Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you into your servant's house, and tarry all night, and wash your feet, and ye shall rise up early, and go on your ways..."* Genesis 19:2a; *"And the man brought the men into Joseph's house, and gave them water, and they washed their feet; and he gave their asses provender."* Genesis 43:24; *"So he brought him into his house, and gave provender unto the asses; and they washed their feet, and did eat and drink."* Judges 19:21. See also Genesis 18:4; 24:32 and I Samuel 25:41. Being that the feet were considered the most lowly unclean member of the body, it was also the one member of the body that one could demonstrate total humility to another. And though Jesus had given us an example based on an act that had been demonstrated by others many times before, Jesus made it an intricate part of the Lord's meal. A most beautiful story of the act of humility in love is the story of the sinner woman of Luke 7:37, 38 and 44 to 47a. *"And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment. And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment ... And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss; but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment. Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven: for she loved much ..."* Some may notice that there is quite a bit of difference between the account of this story by Luke to those of Matthew, Mark and John, however, we will not be addressing the whole of that controversy in this study, but will make a few observations. It is possible that Luke was speaking of a different event since Matthew and Mark speaks of the host as being Simon the Leper and John does not name the host. Luke has the host as being Simon the Pharisee and the woman being a notorious sinner whereas the gospel of John speaks of Mary anointing Jesus (John 12:3) who was the sister of Martha and there is no indication that she, Mary, was a great sinner in contrast to what Luke indicates. It would be interesting to know if the account by Luke is in relationship to the same story as the other gospels, however, in this instance, we are concerned with grasping the understanding that for a Middle Eastern person to wash another's feet was to perform an act of total humility. The woman sinner in the gospel of Luke had great love for Jesus for she not only poured out a most precious and expensive thing for a woman of that day, her alabaster phial of perfume upon his feet and but also kissed Jesus' feet, which to the Jews was the most lowly member of the body. What a demonstration of love that this woman gave who had done many sins! Another important aspect that this story demonstrated was that she showed that she loved much. In demonstrating true love, it illuminates the traits of gentleness, meekness and humility one has towards others. It is these characteristics that

will make you and I willing to come into submission to the Will of God, and we learn His Will by abiding in the teachings of His Christ. As Christians, we should no longer be led by just what we want to believe, but what is the actual truth. Being humble, we should become submissive to the teachings of the Words of God's Christ. Salvation will not come to us because of what we want to believe but through grace and truth uttered from the mouth of the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

Returning to the ordinance of footwashing, for the Christian in today's age, it is an act of one's humility towards their brother or sister in the faith. It is a sign of one showing equality and love towards their brother or sister. Very important words spoken by Jesus were: *"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."* John 13:14, 15; *"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. For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? but I am among you as he that serveth."* Luke 22:26, 27; *"And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant."* Matthew 20:27. Though Jesus knew he was God's Christ, and that God had exalted him above all, yet he always referred to himself as one serving others, for he knew that the Master, in teaching, serves those he exhorts to. Let us remember that those writers of the New Testament books such as Paul, James, Peter and Jude, all considered themselves as servants in doing God's work. All Christians should consider themselves equal in the family of Christ and be willing to serve one another.

"He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded." John 13:4, 5. Verse 4 begins "He riseth from supper"; this quote does not say "after supper" as some groups assume, so we don't know if supper or the Passover meal was finished, as it does not say that it was; it simply says that he rose from supper. Judas must have been there for the footwashing given verses 10, 11 and 21 to 30. We also know Jesus "after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again." (verse 12a). Reading Matthew 26:21 to 23 and Mark 14:18 to 20, was the sop event before or after the Passover supper or had Jesus taken leave of the Passover meal? Many churches have expended great amounts of time to the argument of its precise timing. It is evident that the footwashing took place before the institution of the emblems of the Lord's meal. And it is also quite clear that Judas would have not participated in the Lord's emblems: *"Jesus answered, He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. And after the sop Satan entered into him. Then said Jesus unto him. That thou doest, do quickly ... He [Judas] then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night."* John 13:26, 27, 30. It was during this interval when Judas went out to the high priest and Pharisees to betray Jesus that Jesus gave the emblems of his new covenant, and his farewell message to his disciples. So though, in all probability, Judas was present at the footwashing, he was not present for the emblems since the gospel of John tells us Judas left Jesus and the disciples right after having been handed the sop. But again, let us repeat, because the scripture gives strong evidence of the footwashing preceding the Lord's meal, we should not make the time element the prominent issue of the ordinance. This act was for an example for us to show the love of compassion and humility for each other who are of the family of Christ, and we should not turn this act of love into an act that causes division.

"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." John 13:6 to 8. Many persons when reading this verse, fail to give proper consideration of what was happening. Why would Jesus say to Peter, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me?" Did it not seem a harsh remark to make? It wasn't a harsh remark when we understand the example he was demonstrating. Jesus also said "What I do thou knowest not now". The point Jesus was making was that if Peter would not permit Jesus to wash his feet because he was his Lord and Master, what might Peter's attitude be towards the people that he would eventually minister to when he became their master or teacher? Would he feel far too superior to serve them in a most lowly state for the sake of their salvation? Jesus gave the answer in John 13:12b, 13, 14. ***"...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."*** There was to be an attitude of servitude among the members of Christ, and as the apostle Paul put it: ***"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."*** Galatians 3:28; ***"For by one Spirit are we all baptized unto one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."*** 1 Corinthians 12:13. What is of greater importance: the manner and state of mind while performing the footwashing, or when it is done in relation to the partaking of the Lord's meal? ***"Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier [greater] matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone."*** Matthew 23:23. In this instance, we speak of meekness and humility toward the church members. Judge within your heart which is greater before God: the precise time element or the performing the act of footwashing with full humility?

This is the summation of what Jesus was setting before us by his example of footwashing: ***"A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."*** John 13:34, 35. This love for our fellow man we must learn to demonstrate at all times. It should be part of our every day character. Then can we claim to be Christian, not only in name, but also in Spirit.

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