

Foot Washing

Introduction

Foot washing is an important subject in the Gospels that cannot be ignored (though it is mostly ignored today). It is also a matter that is easily misunderstood.

Why is it important?

Firstly, there are lengthy passages in the Gospels about a woman washing Jesus' feet and Jesus washing his disciples feet (Lk 7:37-46¹ and Jn 13:5-17). In both cases Jesus draws lessons for his followers that he deems important. Secondly, he explicitly states that his disciples should do the same thing to each other, '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'; (Jn 13: 14-15). Thus we have no choice but to understand what Jesus is saying and do it. But what does he mean?

Foot washing in Bible times

Foot washing is seen many times in Scripture, such as: Gen 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; 1 Sam 25:41; 1 Tim 5:10 etc. It arose as a means of refreshing people, when sandals were the chief footwear and gritty sand made feet uncomfortable. It became a custom to wash the feet of dinner guests arriving from walking through dusty roads; usually performed by a slave or servant.

Foot washing applied literally

There are some mentions of the practice in the ancient church, but the details are scanty.² In Anglican and Methodist circles it is observed literally during Maundy³ Thursday of Passion Week, or ordination services, and frequently connected to the Lord's Supper. In the modern church it is usually associated with sects, such as the Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, Amish, Mennonites, Pentecostal, and Pietistic groups, Anabaptists, and some obscure Baptists. Moravians practised it until the 19th century.

How do we understand this?

We must understand what Jesus means by his command; is it literal or figurative?

¹ Note Robertson's Word Pictures: '*Probably in Capernaum. ... It is false and unjust to Mary Magdalene, introduced as a new character in Lu 8:2, to identify this woman with her. Luke would have no motive in concealing her name here and the life of a courtesan would be incompatible with the sevenfold possession of demons. Still worse is it to identify this courtesan not only with Mary Magdalene, but also with Mary of Bethany simply because it is a Simon who gives there a feast to Jesus when Mary of Bethany does a beautiful deed somewhat like this one here (Mr 14:3-9; Mt 26:6-13; Joh 12:2-8). Certainly Luke knew full well the real character of Mary of Bethany (10:38-42) so beautifully pictured by him. But a falsehood, once started, seems to have more lives than the cat's proverbial nine. The very name Magdalene has come to mean a repentant courtesan. But we can at least refuse to countenance such a slander on Mary Magdalene and on Mary of Bethany. This sinful woman had undoubtedly repented and changed her life and wished to show her gratitude to Jesus who had rescued her. Her bad reputation as a harlot clung to her and made her an unwelcome visitor in the Pharisee's house.*'

² Tertullian (145–220) mentions the practice in his *De Corona*, as does the Council of Elvira (300), and Augustine (c. 400), but without details. Some groups practised foot washing at the time of baptism while some monastic orders did it more often (e.g. the Benedictines). It was established in connection with the mass in the Roman church by the 8th century and then continued by the Albigenses and Waldenses in a more practical manner. It also arose from time to time during Protestant revivals.

³ From a word meaning 'to beg'.

The first thing to say is that in cultural times when this practice made sense then it ought to be done. Paul mentions this as normal ministry, such as for visiting saints who had been on a long journey (1 Tim 5:10). Later churches such as the Waldensians did this. In this case it is a sign of hospitality and not of a church ordinance.

However, in times when the practice makes no practical sense then the literal observance of this need not be performed. So how do we observe Jesus' command?

What is to be done?

The first thing is to understand the symbolic meaning of what Jesus did, taking into account what he actually said.

1 Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

2 And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's *son*, to betray Him,

3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God,

4 rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself.

5 After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe *them* with the towel with which He was girded.

6 Then He came to Simon Peter. And *Peter* said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?"

7 Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this."

8 Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

9 Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also *my* hands and *my* head!"

10 Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash *his* feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you."

11 For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, "You are not all clean."

12 So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"

13 "You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for *so* I am.

14 "If I then, *your* Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

15 "For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.

16 "Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.

17 "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

From this we can make these comments.

It is an act of loving service

Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. Jn 13:1

Jesus performed this menial task of a servant because he loved his disciples. He had already explained that a principle feature of Christian ministry and leadership is service, taking the lowest place (Matt 19:28, 20:16; Mk 9:35). This was a loving demonstration of service in action. Jesus took the lowest place, the place of the household slave, and served the disciples. Leaders who love the flock will be happy to take a low place and serve them. A significant sign of a false teacher is the desire to have a lofty place above everyone else.

It is a washing of feet

He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet. Jn 13:5

Jesus washed the disciples individually. It was not a mere commemorative gesture, but an actual service to each individual member.

It is not a complete bathing

Jesus answered and said to him, 'What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.' Peter said to Him, 'You shall never wash my feet!' Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.' Simon Peter said to Him, 'Lord, not my feet only, but also *my* hands and *my* head!' Jesus said to him, 'He who is bathed needs only to wash *his* feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.' Jn 13:7-10

It was not a bathing of the whole person. Notice two things:

Firstly, Jesus said that the disciples would understand this afterwards; i.e. after the resurrection. Therefore, this means that the lesson Jesus is trying to teach is not a simple foot washing but something else. The disciples understood how to wash feet but they did not understand the deeper meaning that Jesus was teaching.

Secondly, the disciples were symbolically clean in their person; they need no new baptism; 'you are clean'. What they needed was foot washing, not a shower.

The clean person simply needs to wash the dust off his feet, which have become contaminated by walking in the dusty roads. He does not need a bath but just washing of feet.

It is associated with being a teacher

'You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for *so* I am. 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.' Jn 13:13-15

Jesus says that since he is a teacher, he has washed his disciples' feet and commands later disciples to wash each other's feet. So, being a teacher means being humble enough to serve in this sort of manner and doing this sort of washing.

It is an expression of service

'Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.' Jn 13:16-17

Again, Jesus explains that ministry (which means 'service') will involve washing feet. If Jesus himself set the example, then all who follow Jesus in teaching need to be those who will wash the feet of the disciples.

It was not performed in the early church

There is no example of the apostles literally doing this, in obedience to the Lord, as an institutional church ordinance. The apostles came into the good of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus prophesied, in teaching them all things and explaining the things of Christ. Therefore, it must mean more than literal foot washing.

So, what have we learned thus far?

- Foot washing is commanded as an act of loving service.
- It is following the example of Jesus.
- It is not a bathing of the whole body but merely washing the feet of those who are already clean. Thus it is not baptism and is only for disciples.
- Leaders, and especially teachers, need to follow this humble example as proof of their putting themselves last.
- It has a symbolic value that was not understood by the disciples at the time but was understood later after the enlightenment of the Spirit.

So what is meant by the foot washing of Jesus?

There is a removal of dust on the disciples that must be done, foremost by teachers in the church, but also of disciples for one another.

Is this done literally?

If it were to be performed literally then there would be both a record of instances of the apostles doing this in Acts and also didactic teaching reaffirming Jesus' words. Neither is the case. There is no record of the apostles literally washing the feet of disciples and no instruction on how to do it. The apostolic records are silent.⁴

We can thus rule out a literal fulfilment of this command. It means something else.

So what does it mean?

It is for people who are already clean, that is, who are sanctified by the blood of Christ; it is for disciples only. This action does not make people sanctified; it does not remit sins. However, just as a person who had bathed to be a guest at a dinner party got dust all over his feet in getting there, so the modern believer also, though clean from sin, gets the dust of the world contaminating him from walking in the world.

The believer does not need a new sanctification; that has been done in Christ once for all (1 Cor 1:30). By unification in Christ the believer is dead, buried, risen and sanctified. There is no need to do what has already been done; the believer has been washed from sin by the blood of Jesus: 'But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God' (1 Cor 6:11).

What the believer needs is a refreshing from God to wash away the clinging, corrupting, contamination of the world.

How do we apply this today?

We copy the ministry of the Lord. Initially this was modelled by his washing the disciples' feet but we see it more clearly in didactic teaching.

Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. Eph 5:25-27

This is written in the context of giving an example to husbands to love their wives. The point is that husbands must cherish and nourish their wives constantly (Eph 5:29). The example is that Christ nourishes and cherishes his bride, the church. He does this by sanctifying her (remitting sin) and then cleansing her with the water of the word. It is the

⁴ That is apart from 1 Tim 5:10 which is not a church ordinance but an act of hospitality common in those times.

constant ministry of Christ to apply the word of God to the church to cleanse her from contamination, to refresh her in the Spirit by the word, as part of his preserving ministry.

In the same way the members of the church, and especially teachers, must so edify one another. Teachers must apply the word of God to the church constantly to remove the ideas of the world and get rid of corrupting influences that would hinder believers.

In doing this, teachers must not be authoritarian but must be servants; they must act with humility and grace, just as Jesus did in washing feet. They must understand the difficulties of living in the world and seek to help disciples learn how to avoid corruption.

Solomon is the great warning here. He started off as a wise servant of God but inherited a great kingdom, the largest extent of Israel's borders in fulfilment of the prophecies of God to the patriarchs. Solomon lost his way and backslid after having his fill of hedonism, perhaps more than any man. He had fame, a vast wealth ('All King Solomon's drinking vessels were gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold. Not one was silver, for this was accounted as nothing in the days of Solomon.' (2 Chron 9:20)). He had the respect of peer monarchs, such as the Queen of Sheba. He was known for his justice. He also had over 1000 partners.⁵ Yet, after allowing his relationships to turn him to idolatry, in his old age he was able to write,

Remember your Creator before the silver cord is loosed, Or the golden bowl is broken, Or the pitcher shattered at the fountain, Or the wheel broken at the well. Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. 'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher, 'All *is* vanity.' ... Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, Including every secret thing, Whether good or evil. Eccles 12:6-14

The man who had everything in this world decided, at the end, that it was all vanity, futility and that what mattered most was fearing God and keeping his commandments. The world can offer nothing to the believer, except to slow him down and distract him; at worst it can derail his progress.

Why is this important?

Firstly, it is important to help believers see the problem of wordiness. It is all too easy to be deceived by the enemy and to become world-focused. Believers need to be refreshed by the water of the word.

The application of the actual words of Scripture, and the teaching of Biblical doctrines, acts as a remedy to world contamination. The disciples know a real refreshing when the water of the word is applied to the conscience, cleaning it from dust.

For instance: someone who has watched a TV programme that was unsuitable and felt guilty dealt with the sin involved but had a lingering disquieting feeling. The application of the word in this situation cleanses the mind and renews it; 'do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind' (Rm 12:2).

Teachers who apply the water of the word, the cleansing power of God's word, to the church week by week enable the flock to be renewed in the Spirit.

⁵ 1 Kings 11:1-3 But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites -- from the nations of whom the LORD had said to the children of Israel, "You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart.

Another reason why this is so necessary is that the church itself so easily becomes world focused. Churches, often in great sincerity, begin to adopt worldly methods to achieve divine ends, or worse still, to achieve human ends. For instance, entering into partnerships with the wrong people, buying a large church building, developing a hierarchical authoritarian leadership, demanding money for unbiblical reasons etc. The whole church needs to constantly be washed by the application of the word to remove contaminating ideas.

It is clear, therefore, that churches which are full of worldly ideas and practices have not been washed with the water of the word. Indeed, we can see this today where so many churches either ignore or play down the importance of Scripture. As a result most modern churches are filled with deceit.

Finally, individual believers need to practise this themselves. Whenever they feel that the world is bearing down upon them and they need refreshing in the Spirit, what is required is reading the word of God and asking him to cleanse them from the world.

Conclusion

We must follow the example of Jesus. Teachers must embody the humility of their Lord and Master and serve the church, especially in seeking to preserve the flock from corrupting, worldly influences and washing them with the word of God, week by week.

If believers do not submit to this cleansing they will become more and more contaminated until their consciences are seared and useless.

The more a person grows in the knowledge and fear of God, the more that person realises that the word of God is far more important than he ever imagined. It is spiritual dynamite that has great power to help the believer in ways he has yet to fathom. To ignore Bible reading is the most foolish thing a believer can ever do.

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version
© Thomas Nelson 1982

Paul Fahy Copyright © 2012
Understanding Ministries
<http://www.understanding-ministries.com>