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Washing Feet

by Bryan Hodge

Ough! Pugh! I am not touching his feet. Such may be the reaction one would get today to the idea of washing another's feet.

However, the washing of feet is commended in the Bible (Lk. 7:36-46; Jn. 13:3-14; 1 Tim. 5:9-10). How should we understand this?

First, we should understand the need. Feet were washed to remove dirt (Jn. 13:10). In that ancient area of the world, people did not wear shoes as we do today. Instead, they commonly wore sandals. The most commonly used form of transportation was walking. The land was dry and dusty. Feet became caked with dirt and grime.

Second, washing feet was a common occurrence. Sometimes one did such for oneself (Gen. 18:3-5; 19:2; Judg. 19:21; 2 Sam. 11:8). Sometimes servants performed this task (cf 1 Sam. 25:41). The washing of the feet was a common routine which was done prior to sitting down to eat (Gen. 18:3-5; Judg. 19:21). They typically ate reclined around a low table. It was also common when welcoming one into his home (Lk. 7:36-46).

Third, the washing of the feet is connected with hospitality (Gen. 18:2-5; 19:1-3; Judg. 19:21; 1 Sam. 25:41; 2 Sam. 11:8; Lk. 7:38, 44-46; 1 Tim. 5:10). It is an act of hospitality, and not an act of worship.

There is reason to conclude that this is cultural. The New Testament does not originate the practice. Instead, it appeals to a common existing practice, an act of hospitality.

However, there are principles which transcend culture. (1) We are to be humble servants. J.W. McGarvey commented, "Jesus did not institute feet-washing; he found it already a familiar custom of the land, and merely used it as a most appropriate way of showing the proper spirit of humble service" (The Fourfold Gospel, p. 650). There was a need. Feet needed to be cleaned. There was action. Jesus girded himself, and went to work (Jn. 13:4-5). We are to be girded with humility (1 Pet. 5:5 ASV). None of us should be above washing another's feet or doing some other dirty job to help another, or show kindness. We are instructed "Through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13).

(2) We are to be a hospitable people. We are to be "Given to hospitality" (Rom. 12:13). We are to "Be hospitable to one another without grumbling" (1 Pet. 4:9).