

---

# Bible Talk

---

This week the question is: **What does the Bible teach about footwashing?**

There are certain churches that distinguish themselves from all other churches because they practice "footwashing" in their worship services. They sincerely feel that footwashing is an item of worship that Jesus gave to the church and they believe that in order to be the Lord's true church the members must wash each other's feet during the worship services. Many of the churches who practice this do it once a year when they observe their communion. That is, they believe that since Jesus washed His disciples' feet right after the communion, He has then set a pattern for the church today to wash feet after the communion has been observed.

Our question, then, is exactly what does the Bible have to say about this practice? Are churches doing wrong today by not having a footwashing ceremony in their services?

## **THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Let's begin with the OT. In the OT the idea of footwashing is mentioned only 11 times. When you think about how large the OT is, 11 times is not very much.

Out of those 11 passages:

- Only 6 of them refer to men or women washing someone else's feet.
- 2 of them refer to men washing their own feet.
- 2 of them refer to the priest washing his feet to enter the temple.
- 1 passage (Psalm 58:10) speaks of men washing their feet in the blood of their enemies who had been conquered.

Generally speaking, the evidence from these few passages indicate that footwashing was generally a practice of hospitality – men at that time commonly wore sandals and at the end of a long trip it was refreshing to remove one's sandals and wash the feet. A hospitable host would remove his visitor's sandals himself and would wash his feet.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the NT there are only three passages that speak of footwashing at all – Lk 7, Jn 13 and 1 Tim 5.

From these NT passages we see that besides being an act of hospitality, footwashing took on an added meaning of humility. In other words, if a man would not remove the shoes of his guests and wash their feet, he was a proud man and considered himself better than to do some menial task at that. This was a job ordinarily reserved for servants and slaves. Notice carefully:

### **John 13:4-16**

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!"

(This was most unusual for a master to wash the feet of his disciples! It was an amazing demonstration of Jesus' humility to do this.)

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.

Notice carefully, Jesus gives an explanation about this so there would be no misunderstanding on our part as to what it signified.

**(1) Notice that Jesus did not say that footwashing was given as an ordinance to the church.**

Nothing in the entire passage says anything about a church worship service.

There is no passage in all of the NT that even slightly indicates that footwashing was ever practiced during worship services.

**(2) The key to this passage is found in verse 15 when Jesus says, "I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you."**

In other words, Jesus was not telling the disciples to do **what** He did, but to do **as** He did and there is a difference there. To do as Jesus did means that we shall humbly serve our brethren in any area they may need. It means that we should not consider ourselves so superior that we would not stoop to help our brethren. If Jesus the Lord and Master could stoop to wash the disciples' feet, then we disciples could certainly stoop to help our brethren in any area of their lives in which they are in need.

Suppose, for example, that an elderly widow at church is unable to clean her own house. What would be more profitable to her – for us to go over and wash her feet, or for us to go over and clean her house for her? Which would help her the most? Or suppose a brother in the church becomes crippled and is unable to mow his grass. Which would profit him the most – for us to go over and wash his feet, or for us to go over and mow his lawn?

Some people consider themselves too good to clean their own house, let alone someone else's house. Some people consider themselves too good to mow someone else's lawn. But when Jesus gave us the example to do as He had done, He demonstrated to us that we cannot be proud. We cannot consider ourselves so superior that we cannot stoop down to aid our brethren and sisters who are in need.