

WASHING OF THE SAINTS' FEET A NEW TESTAMENT ORDINANCE

John chapter 13

By Elder Herb Hatfield

This subject has been one that has suffered much at the hands of Bible commentators. While most commentators will acknowledge that Christ did literally wash the disciples feet and that He did say, *"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), yet they will say that it is not necessary for saints to LITERALLY wash each others feet today. They say that Christ was only practicing a custom of the times and that it has no importance to Christians today. They teach Christians can wash each others feet by acts of kindness and service to each other. I do not understand or accept this teaching. Here are some reasons I believe the practice of literally washing of the saints' feet is a New Testament ordinance for Christians of every age:

1. I believe the Bible to be the final authority of faith and practice. I am a Baptist because I believe it is important to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. Since Christ is my Savior, my Lord and my King, then I want to follow Him completely in every area of my life. While I realize because of our carnal natures we cannot follow Christ perfectly, yet that should be our desire. There are some matters of faith and practice that today's Christians may not have a clear verse of scripture about, but here we have a clear statement from Jesus Christ on the subject. I find it very difficult to understand how any sincere Christian can ignore the clear statement by Christ that *"I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you."* There is no argument advanced about the accuracy of the translation or that this is not found in some older manuscripts, it is simply explained away by saying, "We don't have to do this."

Jesus Christ is the Only Begotten Eternal Son of God, Creator of Heaven and Earth and that *"without Him was not anything made that was made."*(John 1:3). I believe that *"by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by Him, and for Him: And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist."* (Col.1:16-17) Christ was sent by the Father, to reveal the Father to us (John 1:18) and He taught the very words that the Father gave Him (Jhn.7:16).

If Christ is very God, sent from Heaven to reveal the will of the Father to His people, then how does anyone have the authority to exclude or set aside the teachings of Christ, by saying, "we don't have to do that today." Are not all the teachings of Christ true? Are they not then authoritative and binding on the saints of God today? I say "Yes!" Dear saint of God, if we err in our doctrines and practices, let it not be in failing to literally follow Christ in every thing He has clearly taught us.

2. I believe it is important to follow the teachings and practices of the New Testament apostles and the churches they established. The Apostles were men chosen by Christ to be witnesses of His life, death, resurrection and His teachings. We believe their writings to be the very words of Christ to us given to them by the Holy Spirit of God. They did not write by fallible memory, but rather by an infallible inspiration, they recorded for us the very words and actions of Christ. This was the understanding of the New Testament churches.

In Acts 2:42 we read, "*And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.*" The teachings and practices of the New Testament churches was that of "*the apostles' doctrine.*" Saints today are not to be followers of any man, other than Jesus Christ and His apostles. Paul said, "*Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.*" (1 Cor.11:1) Paul writing to the same church said, "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you," (11:23) Writing to the church at Thessalonica, he said, "*we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God,*" (1 Thess.4:1-3). In his second epistle to that church, he instructed them, "*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us... And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.*" (2 Thess.3:6,14)

I believe the teachings of Christ and His apostles to be binding on the saints in all ages. That the doctrines and the practices of the New Testament churches to be the pattern for New Testament churches today. It was in the same upper room and on the same occasion that Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, that we have Him washing the apostles' feet and giving us the commandment to do likewise. I can not understand the reasoning that says we can take one part of this event and set it forth as a church ordinance binding upon all New Testament Christians today and then cut out the section that deals with feet washing and say we are not bound to practice it today.

Of course I have read and heard the argument that we have nothing in the epistles of Paul, or John or Peter that tells us we need to practice feet washing. I disagree! Let's look at that argument, let's look at the doctrine of baptism. This is a subject that we as Baptists believe is clearly taught in the New Testament and we hold to it tenaciously and well we should. We will not accept baptism by any other mode except by immersion because that is the pattern and teaching of Jesus Christ. We have record given to us, where Christ was immersed in the Jordan River and then He said, "*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*" (Matt.28:19)

We Baptists live and sometimes die for this commandment of Christ. However, we feel free to set aside and ignore some of what the Lord said at this same time and in the same context, "*Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.*"(Matt. 28:20) We jump all over other

denominations because they dare to set aside the teaching of Christ about immersion, yet many Christians feel free to set aside the instructions of Christ, that we teach *"them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."*

The English word "observe" in this text is the Greek word, "tereo". It is used several times in the New Testament and is translated as, "observe, keep, guard, preserve, reserve and hold fast." The word is used by Christ in John 14:15, where He says, *"If ye love me, keep my commandments."* Now what did Christ mean when He gave this instruction. Did He mean, "If you love me, observe my commandments if you want to, if others agree with it, or you can just set it aside?" I do not believe that is what Christ had in mind. Neither do I believe Christ ever meant to give us those options when He said, *"teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."*

We make a great deal when others ignore the teachings of Christ, but most Christians have set aside the teaching of Christ about feet washing just because someone has told us it is not binding on us today. It wasn't Christ! While I agree with most that John Gill writes, I believe him to be wrong in his commentary of John 13:15, where he says that this is not to be understood literally. However he does say about Matthew 28:20: *"Teaching them to observe all things,... All ordinances, not only baptism, but the Lord's supper; all positive institutions, and moral duties; all obligations, both to God and men; all relative duties that respect the world, or one another, those that are without, and those that are within; and these are to be taught them, and therefore to be insisted on in the ministry of the word; and not merely in order that they may know them, and have the theory of them, but that they may put them into practice: **whatsoever I have commanded you;** every thing that Christ has commanded, be it what it will, and nothing else."* Gill's Commentary on Matthew.

We have the argument advanced that there is nothing said about the subject of feet washing in any of the apostolic writings. However, I disagree. Paul, in giving instructions to Timothy under what conditions a widow may be taken under the financial care of the church, said, *"Well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work."* (1 Tim.5:10) Here again, the commentators have taken their scholarly knives and cut-up these instructions by Paul and divided them into some things that are binding and some that are not binding on Christians today. Christ rebuked the religious teachers of His day by telling them, *"Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition [teachings]"* (Matt.15:6). Paul gave clear instructions that the washing of the *"saints' feet"* was to be practiced among the New Testament Christians. But the commentators tells us it is not necessary today. They think they have more authority than the Apostle Paul.

It is agreed by all honest church historians that feet washing has been observed by some, if not all Christians since the days of Christ. Gill says, it "has been the practice of some: it was so understood by the church at Milan, and there practiced; and this custom was continued and defended by St. Ambrose, even though not received by the church of Rome" Commentary on John 13

The English translation of the book, THE BLOODY THEATER or MARTYRS MIRROR of the Defenseless Christians,...from the Time of Christ to the year A.D. 1660 is a great source of church history. This book was compiled from various authentic chronicles, memorials, and testimonies, by Thieleman J. van Braght, and translated from the original Dutch in 1660. It was published by the Herald Press of Scottsdale, Pennsylvania. In this ancient history of the Anabaptists, we have a doctrinal statement of those Christians given in the Introduction, which says:

"Feet washing we confess to be an ordinance of Christ, which He Himself performed on His disciples, and after His example, commended to true believers, that they should imitate it, saying, *'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.'* Again: *'If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.'* (John 13:14,15,17).

In Hassell's church history, we read, it "has been more or less observed within the bounds of the Kehukee Association for the last hundred years. Some of the Kehukee churches have never observed it at all; others have occasionally observed it upon motion of some one in Conference, and attended to it during some week day at the meeting-house, or at some private house at night, and this at long intervals. Others observe it annually, and connect it with communion or the Lord's Supper; while others repeat it quarterly, and in every instance connect it with communion, which almost invariably occurs on Sunday, after the preaching service."

"The argument in favor of the observance of feet-washing, either regularly or irregularly in church meeting, is about as follows, ... *If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.*" Here is a command, it is urged, binding on the disciples and on all who should believe in the Lord Jesus Christ till the end of time. That it should be **literally** observed, too, as it was **literally** instituted. That its literal import cannot be dispensed with or construed away as being only figurative, no more than can Baptism and the Supper be dispensed with literally or be construed as merely figurative. And some on this side of the question also urge that, as the washing immediately followed the Supper (this is wrong, HH), so it should now be attended to immediately after (before, HH) communion, either quarterly or annually. While some recognize it as a duty only, others hold it as an ordinance inseparably connected with the Supper, and that it should be held just as sacred."

Hassell says, "The *senior* author of this work has always, since his connection with the Baptists, supposed this to be an open question among them and has had the like feelings of regard and fellowship for those who did and those who did not literally observe the practice of feet-washing. He has a number of times, since his church membership (a period of more than fifty years), united with brethren in feet-washing, and has had some pleasant seasons on these occasions. He never made a move in that direction himself for a public feet-washing, but always sanctioned it when made by others, feeling at all times willing to wash a brother's feet, either in the meeting-house or in a private house, either by day or by night. He has united with brethren in this rite at

a private house by night, where the brethren occupied one room and the sisters another. He has engaged in it, with the members of his own church and others, when occasionally they have agreed to enter into it; and he has united in the literal observance with some who adhere to the custom annually."

Hassell gives some additional historical information on the subject of feet washing in his footnotes of his book, HISTORY OF THE CHURCH OF GOD, Cushing B. and Sylvester Hassell, pages 845-847

In Beebe's, BAPTIST HYMN BOOK, first published in 1858, hymns number 1177 and 1178 are listed as hymns to be sung at the "Washing of Saints' Feet." While doctrinal statements, church history or hymns can not be used to prove a doctrine, it does serve to prove the point that the washing of the saints' feet has been understood by some saints since the days of Christ, as a commandment to be observed by all who would follow in the example of their Savior.

I believe it will give us some better understanding on the subject if we properly understand the setting in which the first feet washing took place. According to the accounts given in Matthew 26:17-19; Mark 14:12-17 and Luke 22:7-13, it was during the day of Tuesday, 13th of Nisan, that the disciples asked the Lord where He wished to eat the Passover. They followed His instructions and made ready for the feast in the upper room. This brings us to the evening of 14th of Nisan, the night before our Lord would be crucified on Wednesday, the 14th of Nisan. (Luke 22:14-16). It was while they were eating the Passover, that there seems to have been some contention between the disciples as to who was the greatest among them (Luke 22:24-27).

This then brings us to John 13:2. The Textus Receptus reads "*Supper being ended*" which is what we have in the King James Version and most Greek and Bible scholars agree with this. However, there is much misunderstanding about which supper this is. J.C. Ryle says: "Some, as Lightfoot (and Gill), think that the supper was the same that took place at Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, two days before Passover. Others think it was the ordinary Passover Supper, which our Lord was eating with His disciples the night before His crucifixion. One thing at any rate is pretty clear. It was not the institution of the Lord's Supper. It seems highly improbable that the washing of the disciples' feet would take place after the Lord's Supper. That blessed ordinance appears to come in after the twentieth verse." EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS, p.230 (underlined by HH for emphasis).

A.W. Pink says, "While there has been much controversy as to WHAT '*supper*' is referred to here in John 13. Most assuredly it was NOT the "Lord's Supper", for in 13:26 we find Christ giving the 'sop' to Judas, and the Synoptists make it unmistakably plain that this was at the "paschal" supper... '*He riseth from supper.*' In the order of events this comes right after what we read of in 13:1...The question of Peter in 13:24 is inexplicable if the paschal supper had already taken place,...for the Synoptists are explicit that our Lord named the betrayer during this meal. Most of the difficulty has been created by the first clause of 13:2, which should be rendered, 'when the supper arrived,' i.e., "as ready." Mark how that 13:12 shows us Christ resuming His place at the table. '*Then said Jesus*

unto him, that thou doest, do quickly(13:27)...Finally, we believe it can be established from the other Gospels that it was right after this that the Lord instituted His own 'supper' as a lasting memorial of Himself; but before doing so He first banishes the traitor, for that 'supper' is for His own only". EXPOSITION OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, VOL. II, pages 298-333

G. Campbell Morgan says, "*He...riseth from supper.*"...He broke in upon the ritual of the Passover feast. The washing of the feet was not the ordinary washing of the feet of guests. This was something new, something startling, something intended to arrest their attention. ...I think I am warranted in saying that the general consensus of careful and scholarly opinion is that he (Judas) did not partake of the new feast (the Lord's Supper), that he was excluded before it was observed." THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN, pages 231-234 (underling by HH for emphasis).

Thus it was while Christ and the apostles were observing the Passover, the true Last Supper, that there was this discord among them as to who was the greatest. Christ, knowing the hearts of all men, rose from the table and took a towel and began to wash the disciples feet individually, including Judas, who was still in the room (Matt.26:21-25; Mark 14:18-21; Luke 22:14, 24-27)

When He would have washed Peter's feet, Peter said to Him, "*Lord, dost thou wash my feet?*"(13:6) Every word he says is emphatic. "*Dost thou*"(the Lord and Master), perform the service of a lowly servant to me? This expression of Peter's humility and his reverence for Christ that caused him to refuse to allow Christ to wash his feet.

Christ, the patient teacher said to him, "*What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.*" These words should have caused Peter to submit to what the Lord was doing, however, Peter responses with a stronger objection and more emphatic statement, "*Thou shalt never wash my feet.*" Rather than being a mere expression of humility as before, Peter, who was always quick to correct the Lord (see Matt.16:22 & Acts 10:14), is now defiant.

Christ the teacher, rebukes Peter with stern words, "*If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.*" (13:8) Unless you are willing to submit yourself to my teachings, you can not be part (fellowship) with what I am doing. Peter, in his typical extreme reaction, says, "*Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.*" (13:9) Again, the Lord must give Peter and all His disciples a lesson, "*He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all.*"(13:10) The Lord tells Peter that he had already been bathed (Greek-*louo*) in the washing of regeneration and now needed only to submit this washing of his feet.

Then after washing all the disciples feet, the Lord tells them again that one of them would betray Him. Then He gave the sop to Judas and dismisses him from the group (John 13:12-30). Having dismissed Judas, His betrayer who was the son of perdition, Christ then instituted the Lord's Supper with the eleven Apostles. (Matt.26:26-30; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20; I Cor.11:23-25)

B. H. Carroll says, "Jesus instituted the ordinance (the Lord's Supper) on the night before his death, at the last Passover, in an upper room in Jerusalem. All the apostles, except Judas, were present and participating. Judas was not

present because he was sent out by our Lord before its institution (see Matt. 26:25; John 13:23-26). The apostles receive it as representing the church. INTERPRETATION OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE, Vol. 4, p.308. (underling by HH for emphasis).

To support the fact that Judas was dismissed from the company of the apostles and gone out to betray Christ, I offer the following comments from some Greek scholars on I Corinthians, chapter eleven and verse twenty-three. Vincent says, the words, "*He was betrayed,*" are in the imperfect tense and should be read as, "*He was being betrayed.*" (WORD STUDIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, Marvin Vincent, D.D., Vol. III, page 250)

THE EXPOSITOR'S GREEK NEW TESTAMENT, Vol.II, page 880 gives these words, "*while the betrayal went on.*" A. T. Robertson says, "*He was betrayed*" is (*paredideto*). Imperfect passive indicative (irregular form for *paredidoto*," Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 340) which speaks of an action on-going in the past.

I can not believe that Jesus Christ, who knows the heart of every man and who knew that Judas was "*the son of perdition,*"(John 17:12) gave the unleavened bread and the cup of wine to Judas! I cannot accept that He, who is the Head of His church, allowed the unregenerate Judas to sit in communion with the regenerated apostles. I do not believe that Christ, who is the Confirmer of the new covenant with His people (Dan.9:27) and the Messenger of the covenant (Mal.3:1), gave the sign of the covenant to Judas, saying, "*Drink ye all of it: for this is my blood of the new covenant,*" (Matt.26:27-28) Therefore, the washing of the disciples feet must have taken place BEFORE the Lord instituted the Lord's Supper with the eleven, regenerated and baptized apostles. Christ dismissed Judas that He might remove all leaven from His first church.

When the Lord had finished washing the apostles feet and had sat down again, "*He said unto them, 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. 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 13:12-17)

Gill says of the phrase, "*Verily, verily, I say unto you,*" ...that "This is a strong way of asseveration, and is used when anything of moment and importance, and worthy of attention and observation is delivered. "*the servant is not greater than his Lord;* it is enough that he be as his Lord, which was a common phrase among the Jews; (Matt.10:25) ...here it is designed to engage to humility; for if a master condescends to perform such an action, much more may a servant: "*neither he that is sent, is greater than he that sent him.*" Gill then adds, "the very phrase here used by Christ; and his meaning is this, that if it was not below him, who had chose and called, and sent them forth as his apostles, to wash their feet, they who were sent by him, should not disdain to wash one another's." John Gill's COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

There is another time that the subject of washing another person's feet is referred to in the Bible, it is in I Samuel, chapter twenty-five. David's servants went to Abigail and told her that David desired her to become his wife. We read in verse forty-one that, *"She arose, and bowed herself on her face to the earth, and said, 'Behold, let thine handmaid be a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord.'"*

It was a common act of hospitality for a guest to be provided with water to either wash their own feet or to have them washed by a servant. This was a task for the lowest of servants to perform. This godly woman, who had such great esteem for David that consider herself not worthy of being his wife, says, *"let thine handmaid be a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord."* She was willing to become the lowest of servants in the house of David.

Is this not the position that our Lord assumed before His apostles who had been arguing over which one was the greatest in the kingdom? He had taught them, *"Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: (Matt.20:25-27)* Now, He physically demonstrates what He had taught in precept; He became their lowest servant! Then He told them, *"The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him."* What a demonstration of humility! There can be no greater demonstration Christian love and humility for us today. Are we too proud to follow the example of our Savior?

For the sake of making a point, let me ask a question. What error is committed or what Biblical rule is broken, if we practice the literal washing of the saints' feet if it is not deemed to be mandatory? Can it be denied that Christ washed the disciples feet and told them you should also wash one another's feet? What scripture do we have to nullify that commandment? Was it not during the Christian/Gospel dispensation? Was Christ not assembled with His New Testament church when He gave this commandment? Why did the Apostle Paul make reference to Timothy of washing the saint's feet if it is not a New Testament commandment that was practiced by the churches?

The argument is made, "Well, it is only referred to one time in the scriptures. I ask how many times must the Lord make a command before it is binding on the saints? How many times in the New Testament do we have the teaching about the necessity of being born-again? The objection is made that there is no mention of the subject in I Corinthians when Paul is teaching on the Lord's Supper. True, but why was Paul even writing about the subject of the Lord's Supper? Was it not because of errors and abuses connected with the Supper that Paul wrote to correct them. There is no mention of the Lord's Supper in any of his writings to any of the other churches. What, my brethren is the opposition to simply trying to do as the Lord has commanded us? Is it not that we may be a reluctant to acknowledge an error in our doctrine and practice?

It is appalling and unimaginable to me, that we Baptists, who have historically championed the sole authority of the Word of God in all matters of faith and practice, have so departed from the clear teachings of Jesus Christ on

this issue. Even among those who do observe the feet washing, it is most often observed AFTER the Lord's Supper which is NOT according to the Biblical order, but rather to TRADITION. I wonder if Paul's statement in Romans does not apply, "*What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid.*" (Romans 6:1,2)

In a day when there is such a need for a God sent revival of genuine humility and Christian love among the saints, should we not like Israel of old, seek out the law of the Lord and restore again Biblical worship among us? Like the Baptists of yesteryears, when they had forsaken the practice of singing in their churches, we need to repent of our error and turn again to the commandments of Christ, the Head of His church and submit to Him as our Sovereign King.

Let me point out, that I am not advocating that the washing of the saints' feet is a church ordinance, but rather a personal ordinance for individual saints to practice. I believe it may be observed in a church setting or in a private setting such as in a home. I believe it would help solve some of the carnal personality conflicts in our churches, if Christians would be willing to gird themselves with a towel, kneel down in front of a brother or sister and literally wash one another's feet? What could be hurt, except for some pride? I know from experience it has a healing effect on Christians who are at odds with each other and it has a unifying effect on the church membership in general. I also know from first hand experience, that there is a great spiritual joy that the saints of God enjoy when they obey the Lord in this practice. It is as He promised, "*If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.*"(John 13:17) AMEN!