

## FOOTWASHING

John 13:1-17

### I. DESCRIPTION AND BACKGROUND

"Footwashing" is a practice observed by some churches as an ordinance. Some have required it of a newly baptized person or in connection with the Lord's Supper. It consists of a formal ceremony where members, using a small basin, stoop in front of each other and wash usually one foot during a church service. Some of the denominations who practice it are certain "Churches of God" (Mead, pp. 89-111) Mennonites (p.178), Brethren (p. 65) and Seventh-Day Adventists (see photo in magazine), besides a number of other smaller groups.

### II. RATIONALE FOR ITS PRACTICE AS AN ORDINANCE

John 13:1-17; I Timothy 5:9-10. It is said that since Jesus washed his disciples feet, and that Christian widows were commended for washing "the saints" feet, it should be a part of the worship practice of Christian assemblies today.

### III. SCRIPTURAL EXPLANATION

Because foot traffic was on dusty roads in open sandals in Biblical times, it was a customary sign of hospitality for a host to wash a guest's feet, or to provide him with water to wash his own feet, or to have a servant do it for him (Gen. 18:4; 19:1-2; 24:31-32; 43:24; Judges 19:16-21; I Sam. 25:40-41; Luke 7:36-38).

Jesus' disciples had been bickering over who was the greatest (Luke 12:24-30). So on the evening of his betrayal, Jesus wanted to teach them a lesson on humility and servanthood (John 13:1-17). That he did **not** intend to establish a ritual practice is evident by His saying

- 1) "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand" (v. 7).
- 2) "Do you understand what I have done for you?" (v. 12)
- 3) "...I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet..." (v. 14)
- 4) "I have set you an example that you should do **as** I have done for you" (v. 15)

The widow of I Tim. 5:9-10 was required to be known for "devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds" before she was eligible for financial support from the church (See I Tim. 5:3-8).

#### IV. HISTORICAL REFERENCES TO THE PRACTICE

Dr. A. H. Newman's "A Manual of Church History" says, "There is no indication in the Christian literature of the first three centuries that our Lord was understood to have instituted an ordinance by the acts and words under consideration (i.e., John 13:1-17)." Vol. 1, p. 140.

Encyclopedia Britannica: "The chief ceremony was in the early church unknown. From the fourth century it became yearly more common." Fourteenth Ed., Vol. 15, pp. 101-102.

Baker's Dictionary of Theology: "...but the church as a whole has understood the command in a symbolic sense." p. 218

#### V. LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FOR US

- 1) Christians should be more concerned about serving others than "bossing" others.
- 2) The footwashing of Biblical times was a sign of **hospitality**; we should practice whatever would be an act of hospitality for us today.
- 3) We should be willing to render **whatever** humble, condescending service might be needed by a fellow-Christian.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1) What in the way of service do you render for your fellow Christians?
- 2) Is there anything you would be reluctant to do in the way of serving a fellow-Christian?
- 3) Are there any occasions that you might practice **literal** footwashing?
- 4) What do you think hinders Christians from practicing the kind of service Jesus taught?