

WEEK 4
06.25.17

THE DISCIPLINE OF FOOTWASHING



FOCUS VERSE

John 13:14

If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

LESSON TEXT

John 13:4–15

4 He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself.

5 After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded.

6 Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet?

7 Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.

8 Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.

9 Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.

10 Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all.

11 For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean.

12 So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you?

13 Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am.

14 If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

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



FOCUS THOUGHT

Jesus' example of footwashing calls the church to humility, community, and service.



CULTURE CONNECTION

Society's Fascination with Footwashing

Three weeks into the year 2016, Pope Francis made the news in major media outlets with a groundbreaking step for the Roman Catholic Church. The newsworthy moment? Pope Francis decreed that women be included in the footwashing ritual observed annually on the Thursday before Easter.

In their online article "Pope Francis Opens Foot-washing Rite to Women in Gesture of Inclusion," David Gibson and Rosie Scammell attributed the historical shift in Roman Catholicism to Pope Francis's efforts to make this practice of the church more inclusive (*The Washington Post*, January 21, 2016). The

papal decree encourages priests to include people from a broad range of backgrounds in the footwashing service.

While theologians, historians, and followers of church policy debated the social implications of the decree that landmark day in January and speculated on how it could impact other, broader changes to church structure, the larger observation from that news cycle is how this unique practice of Scripture is still a matter of worldwide attention today. Though sometimes misunderstood, by and large footwashing fascinates both faithful churchgoers and the unchurched alike.

OUTLINE

I. HISTORICAL PROGRESSION OF FOOTWASHING

- A. Church History
- B. Pentecostal Practices

II. FOOTWASHING IN SCRIPTURE

- A. Scriptural and Cultural Context
- B. A Call to Humility
- C. In the Shadow of the Cross
- D. An Act of Service in Community

III. FOOTWASHING TODAY

- A. The Power of Remembering Together
- B. Living Out Jesus' Words
- C. Practical Applications for the Church

understood. Though a New Testament practice and a recognized institution among early Pentecostals as seen in historical documents defining doctrines and practices of Pentecostal organizations, footwashing seems to have declined in church practice. Many younger Pentecostals have never participated in a footwashing service and would consider it foreign to the life of the church as they know it.

If footwashing is indeed a biblical mandate, then why is the Pentecostal church relinquishing this practice? As restorationists dedicated to the apostles' doctrine and practices, Pentecostals should be among the churches reclaiming the beauty of footwashing.

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Each Easter many churches from a broad swath of denominations observe communion. A portion of these churches also observe footwashing. Still, among these churches, often confusion and sometimes even aversion shrouds footwashing. Recent scholars have lamented the decline of the practice of footwashing and the misunderstanding of its significance for Christians.

Pentecostals are among this group for whom footwashing is largely not championed, arguably because its significance is not widely

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. HISTORICAL PROGRESSION OF FOOTWASHING

What is footwashing? Both the Old and New Testaments, as well as historical documents, recount evidence of footwashing, but the spiritual meaning invested in footwashing has been established over time. Certainly in church history the act of footwashing takes on a meaning that extends beyond temporal hygiene. If the church's practice of footwashing is coasting toward extinction, as some scholars believe, how has that happened?

A. Church History

In the first few centuries after the time of Christ, footwashing was construed in a number of ways. Footwashing is confirmed in the documents of early church leaders including Ambrose of Milan, Chromatius of Aquileia, Ephraem of Syria, and in canons of church councils, establishing that footwashing had a presence in the first four centuries of the church. However, as early church leaders worked to develop church doctrines, paths diverged concerning how to handle footwashing.

As church history progressed, footwashing became a way for church leaders to appear benevolent and humble by washing the feet of the poor or lowly in a public ceremony. Martin Luther objected to the faux humility and hypocrisy he sensed in the ritual that footwashing had become during the Reformation period. He critiqued the practice, admonishing believers instead to focus on serving their neighbors rather than following a ritual.

Later, other Protestant communities gave prominence to footwashing. Yet just as quickly, footwashing seemed to regress, with many denominations looking for newer, less intimate ways of pursuing humility and service. In so doing, footwashing seemed to be declining among various religious traditions.

B. Pentecostal Practices

Unlike some church practices that have not been written about extensively by Pentecostals, such as anointing prayer cloths and forming healing lines, footwashing has Pentecostal precedent. It is found not only in the New Testament text to which Pentecostals ultimately are anchored, but also in the historical record of early North American Pentecostals and in the founding documents of those organizations. Footwashing was used in services as an element of corporate worship. It appears from its inclusion in early Pentecostal documents that it was meant to be a designated and recurring practice of the church.



Evidence of footwashing extends to mid-twentieth-century Pentecostals even internationally. In the former Soviet Union, government

leaders found Pentecostal groups unusual by virtue not of their doctrine but by their practices. Robert W. Hefner shared some of the apprehensions the Soviets had because the Pentecostals spoke in tongues, shook under the power of the Spirit, and washed one another's feet (*Global Pentecostalism in the 21st Century*). The fact that footwashing was among the list of signature practices that gave identity to the Pentecostals in the eyes of the Soviets supports the prevalence of footwashing as a common twentieth-century Pentecostal practice. Also footwashing became a mark of distinction between Pentecostals and other religious groups.

II. FOOTWASHING IN SCRIPTURE

Given all the historical record across the centuries, the emphasis unique to Pentecostals, and the common objections to footwashing, the church must look to the Bible for appropriate interpretation of Jesus' example of footwashing and subsequent practices for today. John 13 recounts Jesus washing the feet of His disciples during what we now call the Last Supper. Almighty God manifest in flesh knelt before flawed humanity and cared for them in a manner reminiscent of a servant. Upon completion, He directed these disciples to wash each other's feet and added, "For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15).

A. Scriptural and Cultural Context

A working understanding of footwashing's place in Middle-Eastern culture is helpful. Footwashing secures precedent in both the Old Testament and the New Testament for a variety of functions. The Old Testament indicates footwashing was originally practiced for sanitary self-cleansing (Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; Judges 19:21) or sometimes as a gesture of hospitality by a host (I Samuel 25:41). Typically performed by a servant, footwashing was a familiar custom.

Yet we should not dismiss footwashing as a unique cultural phenomenon meant to be relegated only to a specific time in early eastern

history. John took care to record Jesus' instructions about the act. While understanding that footwashing was not without precedent and served a number of purposes, Jesus' kneeling before the disciples was not routine or expected, as indicated by Peter's reaction (John 13:6-8). Our questions after reading of the event may somewhat mirror Peter's: what was the Lord doing, and are we willing to participate?

B. A Call to Humility

The most common interpretation of John 13 is that it is an example to us for the need of humility. Jesus, our mighty King and Master, stooped before His followers. He laid aside His garments and took up a servant's towel (verse 4). The image of the One who controls all time and space bowing to serve another rightfully situates footwashing as an act of humility.

However, humility simply for humility's sake is only so effective. Preferring fellow believers or avoiding arrogance is vital as a follower of Christ because we value humility as it reflects Jesus' image and transformative work in our lives. We are humble because He was humble—not proven by participating in one annual footwashing service but using such a time to realign our lives in the pattern of Jesus who commanded, “Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 23:10-11).

C. In the Shadow of the Cross

Such humility takes on even greater significance when we recognize the setting of the John 13 passage: Jesus was preparing for the work of the Cross. This context coalesces in a Oneness Pentecostal reading of Scripture that understands the man Christ Jesus to be God manifest in flesh, come to earth for the purpose of redeeming humanity in the ultimate act of love at Calvary. As Jesus laid aside His garments and took up the servant's towel, footwashing was a foreshadowing of the laying down of His life. Dan Tomberlin builds upon this recognition of the incarnational purpose of Jesus: “The story of Jesus' washing the feet of His disciples serves as the introduction to the story of His impending death on the

cross, which is the climax of the Word's descent [incarnation]” (*Issues in Contemporary Pentecostalism*).

This beautiful act of Jesus kneeling before the disciples pointed ahead to the ultimate act of Calvary and meant more than a charge to be kind to others or to be humble. Given that Peter would deny Jesus and Judas would betray Him and yet Jesus still washed their feet, the passage also reveals an almost unfathomable dimension of love. Pointing ahead to His imminent crucifixion, Jesus stooped at the feet of twelve flawed, seemingly undeserving followers and extended unconditional love, fellowship, and service. Footwashing cannot be separated from the context of Calvary and should be observed with thanksgiving and gratitude for the Atonement.

D. An Act of Service in Community

To understand Jesus' role is to understand also the communal nature of His love. Footwashing was not an individual act that could be self-managed or outsourced; it was a shared experience of loving, serving, and caring for others. Furthermore, Jesus did not end the practice simply by serving His disciples or allowing them to serve Him, but He asked them to serve one another: “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet” (John 13:14).

Ingrid R. Kitzberger expounded on the metaphor of love and service being inextricably interwoven. She saw in John 13 a mirroring of Mary's anointing Jesus (John 12:1-8). Both instances of washing feet involved more than even the most lavish hospitality; each service involved a tangible expression of love as well as a revelation of Jesus Christ's forthcoming sacrifice. With that context in mind, Kitzberger added, “Peter's rejection of this footwashing evokes the rejection of Mary's anointing by Judas (who is mentioned now in this text as the betrayer), but it also recalls Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christos, the ‘Anointed One,’ and his subsequent rejection when Jesus announces his death (cf. Mark 8:27-33)” (“Love and Footwashing: John 13:1-20 and Luke 7:36-50 Read Intertextually,” *Biblical Interpretation*, Volume 2.2).

All of these layers to the John 13 passage compress into the contemporary act

of footwashing something much richer than just an act to promote humility. Footwashing recognizes the identity of Jesus—both His incarnational purpose and His infinite love for all humanity. When we participate in footwashing together, we not only recognize Jesus' lordship by obeying His command, but we also enact our role as the family of God by loving one another in an act of humble service, together blessing one another and committing to mutual service.

So does John 13 mandate footwashing as a required practice of the church? Such a framing of the question contradicts the very spirit of the act. Instead the question should be, can we support the communal practice of footwashing from the account in John 13? John Christopher Thomas affirmed we can: "Reading Jn 13:1-20 as a literary unit has revealed that the footwashing is no option for the disciples but a necessity if they are to maintain a share in Jesus' destiny. . . . When the commands to wash feet (13:14-17) are read in light of 13:6-10, it becomes clear that Jesus, as here portrayed, intends his followers to continue the practice of footwashing and for this practice to have a significance related to that of his own action" (*Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*). While Thomas used the words *commands* and *necessity*, the larger issue is that footwashing creates an opportunity for us to be bound together with other believers in the Christ-like role of servant. Perhaps we most closely reflect Jesus when we are serving others and loving our brothers and sisters. With that in mind, footwashing can be understood as a beautiful opportunity to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

III. FOOTWASHING TODAY

Pentecostals celebrate a rich heritage rooted in Scripture. Yet since our faith is experiential in nature—each individual can encounter God directly with the Spirit not governed by any human direction—perhaps we are hesitant to recognize rituals and are cautious about words like *traditions*, *sacraments*, and *ordinances*. We are careful for good reason; words mean something. The church should be intentional about its practices and its language for those practices. Yet for just such reasons, the church should be

intentional about investigating footwashing, reclaiming the practice, and finding ways and words to keep this part of our heritage.

A. The Power of Remembering Together

Sacrament is a loaded word and can connote abuse and negative practices according to some scholars such as Bob Brenneman: "To the extent that certain practices of the early church become codified and standardized—made into 'rituals'—they lose much of their original power and meaning" ("Embodied Forgiveness: Yoder and the (Body) Politics of Footwashing," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, January 2009). He went on to argue that after Constantine, church leaders used rituals as a way of controlling the church, which frequently corrupted the original meaning of sacramental acts.

Certainly the abuse of sacraments for such practices is regrettable. However, to hide from using the term *sacrament* does not change the reality that some practices are needed and meaningful in the church. Whatever term we give to footwashing, it needs to reflect the necessity and value of footwashing while giving place for it to fulfill the biblical mandate and exact the purpose for which it was instituted by our Lord.

Whether we deem footwashing a sacrament or not, the value of it remains as something not merely as symbolic or empty pageantry. The act of coming together to observe this biblical command has deep meaning. In light of Jesus' instituting footwashing as a predecessor to the Cross, our contemporary church service that includes footwashing prompts us to remember together Jesus' sacrifice at Calvary. It brings us together in a special way that only people who have experienced the Cross can understand. As such, it is one way to cement our bond as a church family.

Brenneman got specific about the sociological role of footwashing: "Footwashing forms and re-forms community and character in dynamic and powerful ways. . . . A community that engages in literal footwashing stands apart from the rest of Christendom that chooses to limit the observance of the Lord's Supper to the more hygienic eucharistic institutions found in the synoptic accounts"

(Embodied Forgiveness). We observe footwashing because our Lord directed us to do so. Consequently, footwashing becomes another way the body of Christ is a called-out people, separate from unbelievers.

Often communion and footwashing facilitate deep moves of the Spirit. Any fear of overdoing sacraments and ordinances with the presumption it would undercut their meaning or effectiveness underestimates the capability of the Spirit to move sovereignly, the capability of sincere believers to appreciate biblically mandated sacraments or ordinances, and the sovereignty of God's Word in instituting the ordinance in the first place.

As Pentecostals depend upon and seek the Spirit to move during footwashing, the possibilities for this special institution to be infused with meaning represent an opportunity ripe for the Spirit-led Apostolic community. If Pentecostals were to reclaim footwashing, we could be a testimony to both unbelievers and people of other faith traditions of the power of the Holy Ghost at work when we recognize the Cross, pursue humility, and care for one another.

It is important that contemporary Pentecostals learn to understand and be able to articulate the biblical basis for practices of the church. In an increasingly postmodern society, newcomers to Pentecostalism seem more intrigued by what Pentecostals do than what they believe. We understand, however, that the two are inseparably linked. It is incumbent upon us then to be able to explain the biblical roots of such practices. Developing proper terminology to help us understand and educate others about footwashing is essential. In practicing footwashing, we remember Jesus' sacrifice and remember who we are as a result.

B. Living Out Jesus' Words

If we believe Jesus' command to observe communion was to be followed, so we must also follow His directive for footwashing. Many people have debated if the John 13 account of footwashing is a model and mandate for all churches or a single, localized command Jesus gave specifically to His disciples for a one-time event. Brenneman clarified, "Jesus' early followers most certainly understood

him to be calling them to a concrete practice of footwashing. . . . Both the placement and structure of the text as well as the actual wording of the command promote an interpretation that calls for an imitation of Jesus' example as a 'prototype' rather than merely a cognitive appreciation of his act as a 'moral lesson'" (Embodied Forgiveness).

In Jesus' command to "do as I have done," He asked for humility, service, and care for others. Again, rather than looking for a reason to stipulate Jesus' words as not binding still today, why not celebrate the blessings His directive affords?

Surely such fruits warrant the inclusion of footwashing in the church. Perhaps as churchgoers become more prosperous and successful in society, they wish less to take on the humility, vulnerability, and interactive service inherent in footwashing. Yet this very reason emphasizes why humility is so needful in the church.

C. Practical Applications for the Church

The biblical mandate combined with the shaping of identity facilitated by shared practices call for the reclaiming and retention of Pentecostal footwashing. Rather than abandon footwashing as the Pentecostal church grows, we need the special communal bond footwashing offers now more than ever. As we participate in footwashing, the church will experience a revelation of the beauty of footwashing and deeper relationship with one another for having had these shared experiences and communal acts of worship.

The conspicuous, physical act of footwashing represents an avenue to spiritual experiences that celebrate the incarnational purpose of God and our communal relationships as siblings and servants. Following the record of Pentecostal history and resting ultimately on Jesus' directive in John 13, Pentecostals must reclaim and preserve the beautiful act of footwashing.



At a recent summit of leaders of Oneness Pentecostal organizations, a panel discussed the topic of race relations. Leaders from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds shared

the experiences of their particular organizations and the hardships that came about as a consequence of the state of race relations in North American culture. During the discussion, one leader felt moved to ask a fellow leader of another race if he could wash his feet. An unplanned footwashing service broke out during the summit, and the Holy Ghost moved in a deep and meaningful way. The leaders were brought together in newfound unity as they affirmed a truth of Calvary: we all kneel as equals at the foot of the cross.

Our identity as children of God overshadows every other identity marker; the most basic component of who we are is found in our role as children of God. When we come together as a family, humbly serving one another with genuine love in spite of any societal, cultural, or carnal barriers, God is glorified and touches us in profound ways.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The study of footwashing impacts both the corporate church and the individual

REFLECTIONS

- Footwashing preceded and foreshadowed Calvary. In reflecting on this lesson, reflect on Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Have you taken time lately to thank Him for His mercy and His sacrifice?
- Consider the humility involved when Jesus stooped to wash the disciples' feet. Why is humility such an important part of Christian living today?
- Jesus emphasized to His disciples the importance of serving one another. How have you found the church to be a community?
- Why is serving others contrary to our human nature, and how does Jesus call us away from that instinct and to His image?

believer. As the church—the called-out people of God—we should commit to the unity, humility, service, and fellowship that footwashing engenders. Our prayer as the church will be for wisdom for our leaders as we strive to maintain the beauty footwashing provides in focusing on humility, the work of the Cross, and unified service within a community of believers.

In addition to the corporate church aspect of footwashing, a study of John 13 warrants examination within the life of every believer. Footwashing was set in the context of the Cross. How often do we overlook this most basic and yet most fundamental aspect of our faith? While we likely do not participate in church footwashing every day, we must find ways to make Calvary the daily bedrock of our lives.

God's Word also reminds us today of the importance of the body of Christ. It takes more than one person to have a footwashing service. While the culture of North America pushes more and more toward independence, individualism, and even isolationism, we must commit ourselves to intentional participation in the body of Christ through the worship and fellowship of the church.