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by Daniel Tomberlin



# FOOTWASHING

## The Fellowship of the Towel

FOOTWASHING HAS BEEN observed by the church for centuries. Some early church fathers understood footwashing as a sacrament and associated it with water baptism. Others used the word *mystery* when speaking of footwashing, and presented it as a sacred rite independent of Communion and baptism. Today, churches representing Christian traditions from Roman Catholic to Pentecostal observe this sacred act.

Footwashing has been adopted by various renewal movements as a protest against abuses of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Because early Pentecostals understood themselves to be a renewal of the “church of the Bible,” the practice of footwashing was embraced. Every member was encouraged to observe this sacred act on the basis of fidelity to the Bible and the unity of the church. Today, some have begun to question the validity of footwashing. However, there are many Biblical reasons we should observe footwashing regularly.

### Footwashing witnesses to the descent of the eternal Word

John declared that the eternal Word descended from glory and power to assume human nature (John 1:1, 14). This is a common theme in the New Testament. Peter also spoke of the descent of our Lord when He “made proclamation to the spirits now in

prison” (1 Peter 3:19, *NASB*). In a beautiful early hymn of the church, Paul relates to us the heart of this Christology: “Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself [Greek, *kenosis*], taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8, *NASB*).

The apostolic tradition interprets the Incarnation in terms denoting humility and service. The image of Jesus rising from the table, laying aside His garments, taking a towel, pouring water into a basin, bowing before His disciples and washing their feet incorporates into one sacred action the significance of the Incarnation. In Christ’s own self-emptying, He has revealed to us the glory of God.

Christians, too, are called to empty themselves through self-denial (Matthew 10:39; 16:24, 25; 19:21; Mark 8:34, 35; 10:21; Luke 9:23, 24; 17:33; 18:22; John 12:26; Acts 2:45; 4:34-37; Philippians 2:3-5; 3:7, 8). This is the spirituality of footwashing—the fellowship of the towel. “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). This is a difficult spirituality for Christians

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who live in a culture of affluence, where spirituality is defined in terms of prosperity and success. One who wishes to enter into “the fellowship of the towel” must first experience the *kenosis*, the emptying of one’s self. Footwashing is more than a sacred act of worship; it is also a way of life.

## Footwashing interprets Christ’s sacrificial death

Jesus’ washing of His disciples’ feet interprets the Cross as the climax of the Son’s descent. Footwashing is presented in terms of Christ’s redemptive love and sacrificial death (John 13:1). Jesus’ washing of the disciples’ feet symbolizes a spiritual transformation—their cleansing and placement into fellowship with Him (vv. 8-10). Unless the disciples allowed Jesus to wash their feet, they could have “no part” with Him. Footwashing thus became a matter of salvation. Cleansing and salvation go hand in hand.

Further, Jesus commanded His disciples to wash one another’s feet. By doing so, they affirmed each other as fellow believers.



Footwashing interprets the Cross as Jesus’ having laid down His life for His disciples. Likewise, He commanded His disciples to wash one another’s feet.

## Footwashing offers an opportunity for the sinful to confess their offenses and receive forgiveness

James wrote, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed” (5:16). Too often, we have viewed confession of sin as a private matter, a matter only between the sinner and the Lord. However, confession and forgiveness of sin takes place within the community of faith. The sinner must seek forgiveness from and reconciliation with those he has offended (Matthew 5:23, 24).

Within the community of Jesus’ disciples, there had been a clash of egos and many examples of failure (Matthew 16:22, 23; 26:47-49, 69-75; Mark 9:17-19; 10:35-41). But Jesus washed the

feet of each one and commanded that they wash one another’s feet. Footwashing reminds us that the church is a community of grace in which sinners are to be welcomed and restored.

## Footwashing exemplifies authentic Christian ministry

Footwashing among the disciples was to be performed in the context of their apostolic mission. Jesus is the divine servant; the disciples are servants of the Divine and, as such, are servants to the world. The apostle Paul twice referred to “feet” in speaking of the proclamation of the gospel (Romans 10:15; Ephesians 6:15).

The first-century Corinthian church suffered from schism and turmoil, and many within it challenged and rejected Paul’s apostolic ministry. Although Paul’s ministry was characterized by the “meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:1), some in the Corinthian church classified him as “unimpressive” (v. 10, *NIV*).

Keenly aware of his divine call from Christ, Paul countered their accusation by affirming that he was “not at all inferior to the

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most eminent apostles” (11:5, *NKJV*). He was fearful that some who called themselves apostles would deceive the Corinthian believers so that they would believe “a different gospel” from the one he had preached to them (vv. 3, 4, *NKJV*). He told the Corinthians that those who preached “another Jesus” or “a different gospel” from the one he himself had preached to them were “false apostles” (vv. 13-15).

Authentic Christian ministry is not necessarily defined in terms of bold charismatic leadership, anyway, but in the willingness to lay aside one’s own prideful ambitions and take up the towel and basin to wash the feet of God’s people. ☪



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