

A FORMAT FOR THINKING ABOUT FEET WASHING

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Washing feet comes up in three New Testament texts. **(a)** Luke 7:44 refers to it in an episode about a sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet with ointment, wet them with her tears, and wiped them with her hair (7:36-50). **(b)** Among characteristics of widows enrolled in the church's benevolence program, Paul lists "*washing the saints' feet*" together with parenting, showing hospitality to strangers, and works of Christian living (1 Timothy 5:10). **(c)** In the upper room the night of his betrayal, Jesus washed his disciples' feet (John 13:1-16). The last text has prompted some Christians to consider feet washing an ordinance like communion and baptism—or as a part of the communion observance. The paragraphs below analyze this view, giving special attention to the reasoning that seems natural to the issue.

The following sequence of questions guides the interpretation of texts that mention the washing of feet: Does the passage refer to it as (1) a cultural practice, (2) a teaching example, or (3) a Christian ordinance? The options are arranged in ascending order of strictness and therefore in the order of increasing exactness in the evidence required.

The incident in Luke 7 does not rise above cultural practice. The Lord is chiding his host for criticizing the woman while the host had not even performed for Jesus such normal amenities as giving him a kiss, washing his feet, or anointing his head.

Likewise, 1 Timothy 5 does not necessarily raise the washing of feet above the level of social custom. The text speaks of doing it to the saints but lists it in a context about Christian living—hospitality and good works—rather than Christian fellowship and divine worship (contrast Acts 2:42). Such benevolence may have included housing itinerant evangelists and entertaining other Christians in the home.

John 13 is clearly the text most relevant to feetwashing as a church ordinance. Here the account raises it above a social custom to a teaching example as Jesus himself explained. He used the custom to teach his disciples humility in leadership. The relevance of his actions lay in two factors. First, servants or slaves normally washed the feet of guests. In washing the disciples' feet, Jesus took the role and attitude of a slave, and demonstrated humility and willingness to serve. Second, washing their feet was especially relevant because the Twelve had argued that same night about which them would have highest rank in the kingdom, a fact not recorded by John but known from Luke's account of the evening (22:24-29; cp. Mark 9:34-37 = Luke 9:46-48; Matthew 20:20-28).¹ In light of their typical Jewish supposition that the Messianic kingdom would be a political system, the disciples needed to see that their leadership in Jesus' spiritual

kingdom was to be different from what they had envisioned as their future roles in a political kingdom.

(a) Jesus interpreted his own act as an example (13:15). He was not necessarily talking about a specific act they should repeat periodically, but a behavior pattern they were to practice. He was teaching them a way of acting rather than a specific recurring rite. Washing their feet served as a visual demonstration much like his using a child as an object lesson on another occasion when they were arguing about who was of highest rank in the kingdom (Mark 9:34-37 = Luke 9:46-48).

For what it is worth, we observe that (b) Jesus said that the disciples were to do “*even as*” he had done, not what he had done (καθώς, not ὡς; 13:15b). It was not so much the act he was interested in as a mentality the act illustrated.

(c) He also said that they ought to do as he did. “Ought” implies moral character rather than prescribed rite. The latter requires positive commandment to institute it whereas the former comes from moral commandments based on the nature of the case. Jesus did not tell his disciples to wash one another’s feet; he said they ought to do it. He commanded baptism and communion, however (Matthew 28:19, *etc.*, and 1 Corinthians 11:25, *etc.*). Jesus was giving his disciples an “example”; when he told them they ought to wash each other’s feet, he meant “*wash each other’s feet, for example.*” If Jesus as Lord washed their feet, they ought to wash one another’s feet; yet he as Lord had never washed their feet before or Peter would not have reacted as he did. The Lord himself had not been doing what he told them they ought to do in conformity with his example. They ought to have been washing each other’s feet, so to speak, instead of arguing about who was to hold the highest rank.

Furthermore, (d) at the institutions of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the accounts describe the ordinances as recurrent practices. In commissioning the apostles, Jesus said to baptize those who would become disciples (Matthew 28:19; cp. Mark 16:16). Of the communion cup he said, “*As often as you drink it, do it in my memory*” (1 Corinthians 11:25; Luke 22:19; cp. Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:16, 18).

Finally, (e) there is no clear case of religious footwashing in the New Testament. By comparison, several instances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper appear (Acts 2:41; 8:13, 16, 36-39; 9:18 = 22:16; 10:47-48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5; 1 Corinthians 1:13-18; and 2:42; 20:7; 2 Peter 2:13?; Jude 12?), along with several explanations of their nature and meaning (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-11ff; 1 Corinthians 12:13?; 15:29?; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:5; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21; cp. 1 Corinthians 10:2; and 1 Corinthians 10:16-22ff; 11:17-34).²

One question in 1 Timothy 5:9 remains: if slaves or servants washed the feet of guests, how would it be a relevant test to ask of anyone but slaves whether a woman had washed the feet

of the saints when considering whether to enroll her as a supported widow? Could it be that (1) the activity could be handled indirectly; that is, she qualifies if she provided that service in her home for other Christians under appropriate circumstances? (2) Was washing the feet merely an expression for “hospitality” along with other aspects of hospitality? (3) What would be the provision for footwashing in homes that had no slaves or servants? (4) Is the qualification a specific requirement or a typical indicator of Christian character? This was surely a typical, for-example-type act, an example of “good works,” which heads the list in 5:9 after marital considerations. Furthermore, it was surely typical because those who did not have the means for entertaining guests would be left out of the enrollment. They would have been the ones most likely to need assistance since those who could entertain would not likely need support in their later years, especially those who had servants.

None of the three texts about feetwashing raise it above a cultural practice or teaching example. So, we cannot show that Jesus intended it as a Christian ordinance.

¹Whether washing the disciples’ feet preceded or followed the dispute over rank is not clear. Washing their feet is the first incident of the evening that John’s account describes, but it was “*during supper*” (13:2). Luke recounts the disciples’ argument after the institution of the Lord’s Supper (24:14-23), which has no parallel in the fourth gospel. The announcement about betrayal precedes the dispute in Luke (22:21-23) and follows the washing of feet in John (13:21-30). It might seem more natural to suppose that Jesus’ demonstration was a response to the argument; otherwise, the disciples did not see well the connection with their inclination later to argue over status. On the other hand, having the argument later may offer a touch of realism. The situation parallels Jesus’ prediction to Peter that he would deny Jesus three times, and Peter did so before he realized what he was doing even though he had been told ahead of time and he had strongly protested the very idea of doing such a thing (Luke 22:33-34 + 54-62).

²Those who practice feetwashing often consider it an aspect of communion, so all references to the breaking of bread and drinking the cup can become indirect references to feetwashing as well. While such a thing is conceivable, that supposition does not help us get to the conclusion in the first place that feetwashing is an ordinance or part of it. The issue with feetwashing—as with all other interpretative questions—is establishing the conclusion in the first place. It is not the alternative viewpoint’s responsibility to disprove it.

It is worth noting as well that Jesus institutes the bread and cup together. The feetwashing was a separate incident of the evening.