

**MATERIALS TOWARD  
A HISTORY  
OF  
FEET WASHING  
AMONG  
THE BAPTISTS**





**MATERIALS TOWARD  
A HISTORY  
OF  
FEET WASHING  
AMONG  
THE BAPTISTS**

**Consisting of historical references to the practice  
among the missionary Baptists,  
Including miscellaneous notes on other groups**

BY R. L. VAUGHN  
WAYMARK PUBLICATIONS  
MOUNT ENTERPRISE TEXAS  
2008

ROBERT L. VAUGHN  
3528 COUNTY ROAD 3168 WEST  
MOUNT ENTERPRISE TX 75681

© 2008

All rights reserved  
Printed in the U. S. A.  
By Instantpublishers.com  
Collierville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 286.09  
Subject Heading: Baptists – History

#### Cataloging Data

Vaughn, Robert Lee 1957—

Materials Toward a History of Feet Washing among the Baptists,  
consisting of Historical References to the Practice among the Missionary  
Baptists, including miscellaneous notes on other groups/ R. L. Vaughn

p. cm.

Includes index and bibliographical references

ISBN: 978-1-60458-249-9 \$21.99

1. Baptists – History
2. Baptists – History – Sources
3. Baptists – United States – History

286.09

BX 6235

## FOREWORD

A wise man once remarked, "I have never seen God, but I have seen His tracks." Through a study of history, the Christian readily observes the actions of a sovereign God who providentially intervenes in human affairs; therefore, in a real sense, history is "his-story." It is the thrilling account of how our God takes the various events of history and shapes them to accomplish His divine purpose in the world.

The saga of the people called Baptists stretches across the centuries. Their adherence to a faith anchored in Biblical authority is readily apparent to even the casual observer. Nevertheless, little is known by contemporary Missionary Baptists about the practice of footwashing as a spiritual exercise among them. My friend and Christian brother, Robert Vaughn, has sought to rectify this in part with his excellent treatise on the rite of footwashing among regular Baptists.

Brother Vaughn's book is appropriately titled *Materials Toward a History of Feet Washing Among the Baptists*. Although this is essentially a reference work on a little known subject, it is a valuable contribution to Baptist historiography. It is both fascinating and well written. It deserves a place in seminaries and Bible schools across the country as well as the personal libraries of serious students of Baptist history everywhere.

C. B. Anderson, Retired Chairman  
Department of Social Sciences  
Jacksonville College  
Jacksonville, Texas

This work is an excellent study, providing a most valuable list of sources on a practice, although bypassed by a great many today, that is observed by others as an observance with a biblical mandate. – Albert W. Wardin, Jr., Professor Emeritus of History, Belmont University, Nashville, TN; author of *The Twelve Tribes of Baptists in the USA: a Historical and Statistical Analysis*

Brother Robert Vaughn has painstakingly assembled a massive amount of historical data about the practice of washing the saint's feet. He has taken great care to give the reader a reference for each statement made concerning the history of feet washing. In addition, he has taken great care to arrange the material so that one can easily access the material by time period or geographical region. – Jason L. Skipper, Carriere, MS. Pastor, Wilmer Missionary Baptist Church/Centerville Missionary Baptist Church

## CONTENTS

<b>Preface</b>	-	-	1
<b>Introduction</b>	-	-	2
<b>I. Biblical Overview</b>	-	-	7
<b>Old Testament verses</b>	-	-	7
<b>New Testament verses</b>	-	-	8
<b>II. Feet Washing in Early Christian Contexts</b>	-	-	10
<b>A. D. 100-500</b>	-	-	10
<b>A. D. 501-1000</b>	-	-	14
<b>A. D. 1001-1500</b>	-	-	15
<b>General</b>	-	-	17
<b>III. Feet Washing among the Continental Anabaptists</b>	-	-	18
<b>IV. Feet Washing in the British Isles</b>	-	-	22
<b>England</b>	-	-	22
<b>Scotland</b>	-	-	27
<b>Wales</b>	-	-	28
<b>V. Feet Washing in North America</b>	-	-	30
<b>By groups</b>	-	-	30
<b>By location</b>	-	-	46
<b>VI. Feet Washing in Other Regions</b>	-	-	153
<b>VII. Final Thoughts</b>	-	-	157
<b>VIII. Appendices</b>	-	-	167
<b>A. Feet washing by Baptist Groups</b>	-	-	167
<b>B. Baptist Groups in the United States</b>	-	-	168
<b>C. Predestinarian Baptist Groups</b>	-	-	174
<b>D. Baptist Groups in Canada</b>	-	-	181
<b>E. Baptist Groups in the British Isles</b>	-	-	183
<b>F. Feet Washing in other Groups</b>	-	-	184
<b>G. Anglicanism, Catholicism and Orthodoxy</b>	-	-	189
<b>H. Foot washing by A. T. Green</b>	-	-	191
<b>I. My Story by Joyce Beaty-Shembarger</b>	-	-	195
<b>J. Mt. Zion Association</b>	-	-	197
<b>K. Some debates on Feet washing</b>	-	-	200
<b>L. Letter from M. F. Wheeler</b>	-	-	203
<b>M. Pleasant Valley circular letter, 1898</b>	-	-	204
<b>N. Bits and Pieces</b>	-	-	206
<b>Bibliography</b>	-	-	208
<b>Further reading</b>	-	-	217
<b>Addenda</b>	-	-	221
<b>Index</b>	-	-	229

## PREFACE

Over the years, I have gleaned odds and ends of information about feet washing in church history. I am presenting it here as a means of preserving this material and making it available to others. A small portion previously appeared in *Washing Missionary Baptist Feet in East Texas* (2006).

The original motivation for beginning to gather this material was to demonstrate that feet washing was once a common minority practice of Missionary Baptists in the United States, and that this practice connected historically to earlier Baptists. J. H. Grime wrote, "Some have made a mistake in supposing that the practice was confined to the Primitive or Hardshell Baptists, while the Regular or Missionary Baptists were free from it." In my early preaching days I often met with the idea that the Free Will Baptists and Primitive Baptists practiced feet washing, but that it WAS NOT practiced by the Missionary Baptists. History debunks that notion. As I searched and studied the subject of feet washing, I added other related (non-Missionary Baptist) materials as I found them.

The purpose of this book is presentation of resource material. The presentation is intended to simply pass along information to the reader. For example, it is accurate that Orchard mentions that feet washing was practiced in Genoa in A.D. 660; but what is *his* source? Though I comment on some, I do not try to sort out all possible problems and/or discrepancies. Therefore, I pass along to the reader/researcher the responsibility to determine the accuracy and details of some of the material and sources cited. The format is chronological and geographical. Primary and secondary sources are freely mixed within this format. Some of the history is well known, and some of it is obscure. For the most part, I intend this book to send the student back to the original sources. Unfortunately, this book may be the only ready source for some of the obscure material I found during my research, and is the only source recording those I interviewed. I include some materials just to raise and flag and say, "Here is something that should be checked out." I hope that the presentation of this resource material will add to the overall knowledge of the practice of feet washing as Christian rite through the ages, among missionary Baptists in particular, and provide a handy reference for finding primary and secondary sources on the subject, and clues where to look for more information.

Thanks to everyone who helped make this book possible. A number of individuals and libraries were extremely kind in helping me locate hard-to-find materials. Thanks to those who agreed to be interviewed and those who endured countless e-mail intrusions. The genealogical boom on the Internet must be acknowledged as a boon for making available church and association minutes, history, etc. on the World Wide Web.

For those who prefer to keep their skeletons securely locked in the closet, the dredging up of feet washing may seem like an exposé. But to those who love history and/or love the example of feet washing, this compilation is dearly dedicated.

R. L. Vaughn  
Mount Enterprise, Texas  
July 19, 2008

## INTRODUCTION

"Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet has been called 'the sacrament that almost made it.' It contains both the earthly element and the divine command which constitute a sacrament. Yet except for Catholics on Maundy Thursday and a few sects, not many Christians wash feet." – *Foot Washing and Last Things* by Robert H. Herhold  
<http://jcsn.org/StudyCenter/commentaries/1675.html>

This practice carries several different names – feet washing, foot washing, washing the saints' feet, washing of feet, pedilavium, and mandatum – some which vary from one tradition to another, and some which vary within the same tradition. Even the spelling of the same name (e.g. feet washing, feetwashing, feet-washing, foot washing, footwashing, foot-washing) is not consistently established. Other names associated with feet washing, or the day of it, are: Feria mysteriorum, Lavipedium and Megalh Revnta/megalh pentav (see, e.g. *Commentary from the Annotated Book of Common Prayer*, Edited by John Henry Blunt, London: Rivingtons, 1884). "The ordinance of humility" is common in Adventist groups. [Ger: Fusswaschung, Fr.: lavement des pieds]

This work will generally use the terms *feet washing* and *washing the saints' feet*, except when quoting others. I adopted that terminology years ago when Elder G. V. Hamilton explained, "Every place in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of John where it speaks of feet washing, it is always 'feet' and not 'foot'. In I Tim. 5:10 the word 'feet' is also used." The word "feet" is plural and you wash both feet, not just one foot. (But Cf. Appendix H, bottom of p. 191)

The format is first chronological and then geographical. The material will hopefully be easy to search and find by this arrangement. I begin with Scripture references to the general custom of washing of feet, Jesus washing His disciples' feet, and miscellaneous references in the Bible to "feet". I have compiled what I believe is a fairly complete listing of Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures that might be related to the subject of feet washing. Next, we move chronologically through the rite as observed in early Christian contexts, followed by some references to the practice among the Continental Anabaptists. When we arrive at the modern Baptist era (17<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> centuries), the material is presented geographically and alphabetically. The English General and Particular Baptists are considered, and then followed to North America. The practice proliferates in the United States. After a cursory view of various Baptist groups, the references to the practice among missionary Baptists are considered alphabetically by states. The little bit of material I found concerning feet washing as a rite among Baptists in other regions is considered last. The conclusion excerpts several arguments against feet washing as a rite, and wraps up with some final thoughts. Fourteen appendices gather miscellaneous materials, from outline charts of Baptist bodies to the rite as practiced in Catholicism and Orthodoxy to a defense of the practice by Missionary Baptist A. T. Green.

Concerning what I have chosen to include: sometimes listing an association is an indication that some church or churches within that association observed the practice. In other cases the association took a position (for or against), answered a query, or adopted an article of faith on the subject. What I have chosen to include may sometimes be isolated cases. For example, though I cannot always be certain, several online records of feet washing at a particular church, youth group, etc., may be a one-time event. Nevertheless, the fact that some churches that do not observe washing the saints'



feet as a rite may be comfortable engaging in feet washing as a *one-time* or *occasional* event is a valid part of Baptist thought on the subject. Note carefully that inclusion in the listing may only be because of discussion of or even opposition to feet washing as a rite. Churches, associations, or persons may be included on that basis and not necessarily because they believe feet washing is a valid rite. I have also chosen to document other practices that are outside the concept of feet washing as a rite – e.g. church ministries of washing the feet of the elderly, disabled, etc. as a form of Christian service.

Included for future reference are online links, a bibliography of books consulted, as well as a “further reading” category, consisting of books, articles, etc. on washing saints’ feet that either were not used in or consulted for this work – but that may be useful to others.

Footnotes/endnotes are not used. References appear in the text with the quotation. Where possible I have cited both book sources and online sources, to make future consultation of sources more widely accessible. For space considerations, I chose not to include the date and time that web sites were accessed. The vast majority were viewed between March 2006 and December 2006. Since the entire subject of the book is feet washing, and since the arrangement is chronological and geographical, I have chosen to confine the index to names of persons.

## MISSIONARY BAPTISTS

This work purports to follow the history of feet washing among “Missionary Baptists”. A word of explanation is in order. I have chosen to demonstrate feet washing among the modern (19<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> centuries) Missionary Baptists for two reasons. First, my initial historical compilation began in the early 1980s for a small booklet entitled “The Doctrine of Foot Washing”. It was about Missionary Baptists and feet washing. Second, most people know and understand feet washing is a practice of both the Free Will and Primitive Baptists, while often assuming that the Missionary Baptists do not and have not practiced it.

I make no attempt to address the historical debate surrounding the origins of Baptists. I include information on the Continental Anabaptists, which certainly have a spiritual kinship to the English Baptists. The stories of Richard Blunt and John Smyth show that General and Particular Baptists had knowledge of and interaction with the Continental Anabaptists, both Blunt and Smyth receiving baptism from them. I also include material relating to the practice in the earlier, and sometimes darker, ages of church history. Some of these bodies are clearly not baptistic, and some of the references are not to feet washing as a rite in the way it is generally observed in Baptist churches today. Nevertheless I believe the inclusion of this information can add to the overall knowledge of the background and history of washing the saints’ feet as a rite.

In Great Britain, the Missionary Baptists as a whole represent an amalgamation of the General and Particular Baptists. The British Baptist Union was founded in 1813 as a Particular Baptist organization. In 1833, it was restructured so as to allow for membership of General Baptists. In 1891 General and Particular Baptist work was united in the Baptist Union, with some dissenters maintaining independent organizations. The Fellowship of British Baptists brings together churches that are members of the Baptist Union of Scotland, the Baptist Union of Wales and the Baptist Union of Great Britain. Several independent bodies operate outside these unions.

In the United States, the Missionary Baptists in the North are modified Particular or Regular Baptists united with the Freewill Baptists. Included in this lineage are bodies such as the American Baptist Churches in the USA and the General Association of Regular Baptists. In the South, the Particular or Regular Baptists united with the Separate Baptists and became known, for the most part, as "United Baptists". Some churches still exist under the United Baptist name. From them what is now known generally as "Missionary Baptist" emerged. The Southern Baptist Convention, American Baptist Association, Baptist Bible Fellowship, Baptist Missionary Association, the National Baptist Conventions and many others share in this heritage.

Who is a Missionary Baptist is open to some interpretation of the person making the call. Some groups consider themselves "Missionary Baptist" while outsiders may not. In other cases groups do not call themselves "Missionary Baptist" though taxonomists would say that they are. Free Will Baptists, though "missionary" in theory and practice, have a different historical background from most Missionary Baptists.

Appendices A through E attempt to illustrate the diversity of the Baptist landscape in North America and the British Isles.

## DEFINITIONS

*Duty* – Washing the saints' feet is often referred to as a "duty". This terminology seems preferred by those who did not approve of it in church capacity, probably indicating they mean it as an individual Christian duty. But sources will show it also used by some referring to the practice as a rite in church capacity.

*Example* – Some Baptists that observe the rite do not call washing the saints' feet an ordinance, preferring the New Testament terminology "example" from the John 13 pericope.

*Liturgy* – a rite or body of rites prescribed for public worship; a collection of formularies for public worship ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)); liturgy often means the whole complex of official services, all the rites, ceremonies, prayers, and sacraments of the Church...in certain set forms (Catholic Encyclopedia). This term is not in common use in most Baptist churches, but some Baptists consider themselves liturgical.

*Ordinance* – A Christian rite usually based on an authoritative command or order; Ordinance is the most common terminology used by Baptists to refer to a religious symbolic rite observed in church capacity. The majority of modern Baptists hold only two "ordinances" – baptism and the Lord's Supper.

*Rite* – A prescribed or customary form for conducting a religious or other solemn ceremony: e.g. *the rite of baptism*. – *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* Copyright © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company.

*Ritual* – Ceremony; formalized, predetermined symbolic actions or actions generally performed at regular, recurring intervals; prescribed procedure for conducting religious ceremonies. – Wikipedia, et al.

*Sacrament* – A rite believed to be a means of or visible form of grace; a formal religious act conferring a specific grace on those who receive it; the Protestant sacraments are baptism and the Lord's Supper; in the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church there are seven traditional rites accepted as instituted by Jesus: baptism, confirmation, Holy Eucharist, penance, holy orders, matrimony, and extreme unction; Baptists and other anti-paedobaptist groups tend to avoid the terminology "sacrament". – From [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

## DESCRIPTION

(General observation, from Wikipedia) "The observance of washing the saints' feet is quite varied but a typical service follows the partaking of unleavened bread and wine. Deacons (in many cases) place pans of water in front of pews that have been arranged for the service. The men and women participate in separate groups, men washing men's feet and women washing women's feet. Each member of the congregation takes a turn washing the feet of another member. Each foot is placed one at a time into the basin of water and is washed by cupping the hand and pouring water over the foot and is dried with a long towel girded around the waist of the member performing the washing. Most of these services appear to be quite moving to the participants."

(Mount Paran Missionary Baptist Church) "At the close of the communion ceremony there is a brief pause in the proceedings as the bread and wine are cleared away and the implements of the footwashing service are arranged on a small table in front of the pulpit. It is at this time that a small number of people, most of them young adults, may leave the church. However, the vast majority of the members remains to participate in the footwashing.

"During the interim, also, the pews to the immediate right of the pulpit (the preacher's right as he faces the congregation) are rearranged to create a more enclosed area, an inverted horseshoe. It is within this area that the women participate in the ceremony, with no man entering the enclosure. The results of this reshaping of the physical space is that the women restrict themselves to only this region of the church for their footwashings, while the men tend to use all the rest of the space for their activities, especially the ends of the pews where it is easier to access the feet of a fellow communicant. As at Silas Creek and Bethany, no male or female crosses the gender line to wash the feet of an opposite-sex friend or loved one.

"The footwashing service at Mount Paran is somewhat more reserved than those described above. There is still an intense emotionalism, an abundance of embracing and crying, particularly among the women; but there is none of the shouting and testifying, and less of that general movement throughout the church as individuals seek to communicate their joys of the moment. What one still sees, however, are those touching scenes of warm, loving interpersonal interaction, precipitated by the enormous sensitivity of the footwashing act." – *Giving Glory to God in Appalachia: Worship Practices of Six Baptist Subdenominations*, by Howard Dorgan, 1987, pp. 133-135

## PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Though some practice of feet washing can be seen from early Christian times, knowledge of its practice then remains obscure and the transmission from group to group undocumented. Some anti-paedobaptist groups observed it as a rite or perhaps in some cases as a form of service and hospitality. Its observance among some Continental Anabaptists is well-documented. The connections between early English Baptists and the Continental Anabaptists remain disputed. The observance of washing the saints' feet can be found among both General and Particular Baptists in England, though more among the General Baptists. From England the practice was transferred to America, where it was practiced by some BEFORE the rise of the Separate Baptists. The practice spread northward and southward (and later westward), with the greatest emphasis on the practice among the churches to the south, which appears to have been greatly influenced by the Separate Baptists. The westward spread of the Baptists carried feet washing along with it, but it appears that the farther the Baptists went west, the

weaker the influence of the practice became. Today among *Missionary Baptists* it has survived more or less in pockets – Appalachia; north Georgia and northeast Alabama; south Alabama, south Louisiana and south Mississippi; parts of Kentucky and Tennessee – where feet washing as a rite has (for now) withstood the onslaught of time, apathy, ridicule, and concerted denominational efforts to uproot it.

## ABBREVIATIONS USED

ABA	-	American Baptist Association
ABC	-	American Baptist Churches in the USA
BA	-	Baptist Association
BBF	-	Baptist Bible Fellowship
BC	-	Baptist Church
BPFNA	-	Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America
BGC	-	Baptist General Conference
BGCT	-	Baptist General Convention of Texas
BGC-Bethel	-	Bethel Theological Seminary, St. Paul, MN
BMAA	-	Baptist Missionary Association of America
BMAT	-	Baptist Missionary Association of Texas
BMATS	-	BMA Theological Seminary, Jacksonville, TX
CBF	-	Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
CoGW	-	Church of God (Winebrenner)
DC	-	District of Columbia
FWB	-	Free Will Baptist
GAGB	-	General Association of General Baptists
GARBC	-	General Association of Regular Baptist Churches
GASB	-	General Association of Separate Baptists
GBC	-	Georgia Baptist Convention
IFB	-	Independent Fundamental Baptist
IFLMBA	-	Interstate & Foreign Landmark Missionary Baptist Association
MB	-	Missionary Baptist
MBAT	-	Missionary Baptist Association of Texas
MBC	-	Missionary Baptist Church
MOC-NC	-	Mount Olive College, Mt. Olive, NC
NBC	-	National Baptist Convention
PB	-	Primitive Baptist
SAM-AL	-	Samford University, Birmingham, AL
SBC	-	Southern Baptist Convention
SBTS	-	Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY
SDB	-	Seventh Day Baptists
SEBTS	-	Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, NC
SWBTS	-	Southwestern Baptist Seminary, Fort Worth, TX
TBI-S	-	Texas Baptist Institute-Seminary, Henderson, TX
UB	-	United Baptist
WBF	-	World Baptist Fellowship
Ca.	-	Circa (about)

# BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

## OLD TESTAMENT VERSES ABOUT FEET WASHING

### Custom/Personal cleansing

*II Samuel 11:8* - And David said to Uriah, Go down to thy house, and wash thy feet. And Uriah departed out of the king's house, and there followed him a mess of meat from the king.

*Canticles 5:3* - I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them?

### Hospitality

*Genesis 18:4* - Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree:

*Genesis 19:2* - And he said, Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house, and tarry all night, and wash your feet, and ye shall rise up early, and go on your ways. And they said, Nay; but we will abide in the street all night.

*Genesis 24:32* - And the man came into the house: and he ungirded his camels, and gave straw and provender for the camels, and water to wash his feet, and the men's feet that were with him.

*Genesis 43:24* - And the man brought the men into Joseph's house, and gave them water, and they washed their feet; and he gave their asses provender.

*Judges 19:21* - So he brought him into his house, and gave provender unto the asses: and they washed their feet, and did eat and drink.

### Ritual

*Exodus 30:18-21* - Thou shalt also make a laver of brass, and his foot also of brass, to wash withal: and thou shalt put it between the tabernacle of the congregation and the altar, and thou shalt put water therein. For Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet thereat: When they go into the tabernacle of the congregation, they shall wash with water, that they die not; or when they come near to the altar to minister, to burn offering made by fire unto the LORD: So they shall wash their hands and their feet, that they die not: and it shall be a statute for ever to them, even to him and to his seed throughout their generations.

*Exodus 40:30-32* - And he set the laver between the tent of the congregation and the altar, and put water there, to wash withal. And Moses and Aaron and his sons washed their hands and their feet thereat: When they went into the tent of the congregation, and when they came near unto the altar, they washed; as the LORD commanded Moses.

### Service

*I Samuel 25:41* - And 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.

### Miscellaneous Verses

*II Samuel 19:24*; *Psalms 58:10, 60:8, 108:9*; *Isaiah 49:23, 52:7, 60:13*; *Ezekiel 34:19*; *Nahum 1:15*

## NEW TESTAMENT VERSES ABOUT FEET WASHING

### **Jesus washes His disciples' feet – John 13:1-17**

Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him; Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God; He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded. Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter. Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. 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. For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean. 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? 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.

### **Custom/Personal cleansing/Ritual/Service**

*Luke 7:36-50* - And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat down to meat. And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner. And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on. There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most? Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged. And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment. Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little. And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven. And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgiveth sins also? And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.

*John 12:1-8* - Then Jesus six days before the passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him. Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment. Then saith one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, which should betray him, Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor? This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein. Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this. For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always.

*I Timothy 5:10* - 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.

### **Miscellaneous Verses**

Matthew 10:14, 26:6-13; Mark 1:7, 6:11, 14:3-9; Luke 9:5; John 11:2; Acts 13:25; Romans 10:15; Ephesians 6:15

Quotations from the Authorised Version

### **Feet washing and vulnerability**

“Even those churches that do sacramentalize and enact foot washing try to mitigate the intimacy of the act...But it is precisely the scrupulous toenail clipping and pre-church scrubbing of feet that points to the real gift of foot washing. For our attempts to have clean, sweet-smelling feet to offer betray the many ways we are rendered vulnerable by our bodies. When you offer your feet to be washed and gently dried, it is impossible not to notice the difficult relationship between our bodies and who we understand ourselves to be. And when you kneel to wash the feet of another, you glimpse the vulnerabilities that attention to the body evokes in another.” – Stephanie Paulsell in *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice*

## FEET WASHING IN EARLY CHRISTIAN CONTEXTS

The following miscellanies about feet washing in early church history are at best sketchy. Often there is little reference as to how it was practiced or what kinds of churches were practicing it. In addition to my own few findings, John Christopher Thomas' *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* adds substantially to the body of knowledge.

A. D. 100-500

Thomas finds few very early references, though he makes a good argument on pp. 146-47 that the absence of such references is not proof that it was not practiced. He finds a possible allusion to feet washing in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written in 156. He cites it according to the translation of C. C. Richardson in *Early Christian Fathers* (p. 154 New York: MacMillan Press, 1970).

"And when the funeral pile was ready, Polycarp, laying aside all his garments, and loosing his girdle, sought also to take off his sandals,--a thing he was not accustomed to do, inasmuch as every one of the faithful was always eager who should first touch his skin." – *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*. 13:2 (Roberts-Donaldson Translation)

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/martyrdompolyarp-roberts.html>

This above is definitely not a clear reference. Thomas points to the possibility of an allusion to feetwashing based on the description of laying aside of garments, the mention of not removing the shoes in relation to touching his skin, that *apsetai* (translated touch) in some contexts means to wash, and tradition of Polycarp's connection with the Apostle John.

The *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. IV, p. 339 cites that "the post-apostolic age understood the example thus given to be mandatory." In *A Sermon on Church History*, W. C. Arnold claimed that Mosheim said "the Anabaptists of the first centuries believed the example of feet washing, given by Jesus Christ, had the force of a positive command." – <http://www.bibletruthforum.com/cords2/art211.htm>

"Justin, to whom reference is here made, was born A. D. 89 and died A. D. 176. He is the first author after the Apostles, so far as we now know, in whose writings this subject is mentioned." – *The Christian Ordinances*, C. H. Forney, 1883

<http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/believers/forneytco/TCO14.HTM>

**[Note:** I checked various sources, and did not find a reference to feet washing made by Justin Martyr; see e.g. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/justin.html>].

Tertullian (ca. 155–230) in *De Corona* (written circa 211) mentions feet washing as part of Christian worship. [Ante-Nice Fathers, III, Roberts & Donaldson, p. 98 (Eerdmans, 1951)] Tertullian indicates "feetwashing was practiced in his time, but gives no clue as to by whom or how." – *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, Bender, Gingerich, Krahn, Smith, editors, Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1956, p. 348

"...I must recognise Christ, both as He reclines on a couch, and when He presents a basin for the feet of His disciples, and when He pours water into it from a ewer, and when He is girt about with a linen towel--a garment specially sacred to Osiris. It is thus in general I reply upon the point, admitting indeed that we use along with others these articles, but challenging that this be judged in the light of the distinction between things



agreeable and things opposed to reason, because the promiscuous employment of them is deceptive, concealing the corruption of the creature, by which it has been made subject to vanity.” – Tertullian, *De Corona, Chapter 8* (Roberts-Donaldson Translation)  
<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ter tullian04.html>

“Who will, without some suspicion of his own, dismiss her to attend that Lord's Supper which they defame? Who will suffer her to creep into prison to kiss a martyr's bonds? nay, truly, to meet any one of the brethren to exchange the kiss? to offer water for the saints' feet?” – Tertullian, *To His Wife, Chapter 5, Of the Hindrances which an Unbelieving Husband puts in His Wife's Way* (Roberts-Donaldson Translation)  
<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ter tullian29.html>

“Several second- and third-century Church theologians – including Irenaeus (120-202), Clement (‘The Disciple of Peter the Apostle’), Cyprian (100-158), Clement of Alexandria (c. 153-193) and Tertullian (145-100) – mention concepts which might imply the liturgical practice of footwashing in their time, but these comments do not confirm the practice.” According to Graber, “These writings are in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885). On Irenaeus, vol. 1, p. 493; Clement, vol. 8; p. 62; Cyprian, vol. 5, pp. 283, 545; Clement of Alexandria, vol. 2, p. 435; and Tertullian, vol. 3, pp. 98, 47. The second Tertullian reference is more likely to handwashing.” – *Mennonite Footwashing: Identity Reflections and Altered Meanings*, by Keith Graber Miller  
<http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/book/print/132>

“Origen (203-250) discusses the feet-washing at length, and says that it is not to be perpetuated literally...” – *Commentary on St. John*, Book xxxii, See Wace's Introduction  
<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/info/origen-wace.html>  
Consider also Origen, *Genesis Homily 4.2, Epistle 5.3, and In Librum Iudicum, homilia 8*

Council of Elvira, c. 300, mentions feet washing “the substance of which sheds little light upon the practice, except to discourage it”. Thomas writes, “the Synod disavows such a practice” but “the denunciation itself is additional evidence that early in the fourth century footwashing was being practiced.” But the *Catholic Encyclopedia* states, “This ceremony is only found in Gaul, Spain, and Ireland. At the Council of Elvira in 305 an order was made that it should be performed by clerks and not by priests. This limitation, of which the wording is quite clear, has been unaccountably interpreted to mean that it was then forbidden altogether.” – *Catholic Encyclopedia Volume VI*, Nihil Obstat, September 1, 1909. Remy Lafort, Censor Imprimatur. John M. Farley, Archbishop of New York  
[http://www.traditionalcatholic.net/Tradition/Mass/Gallican\\_Rite.html](http://www.traditionalcatholic.net/Tradition/Mass/Gallican_Rite.html)

Feet washing practiced in Gaul and Ireland. Eliminated in Spain by A.D. 305, “Feetwashing Among Baptists in Georgia”, by Charles O. Walker, in *Viewpoints: Georgia Baptist History, Volume I*, 1968, p. 31

“The bishop shall eat often with the priests in the Church, that he may see their behaviour, whether they do eat in quiet and in the fear of God. And he shall stand there and serve them; and if they be weak (if he can), he shall wash their feet with his own hands. And if he is not able to do this, he shall cause the archpriest or him that is after him to wash their feet.” – *The Canons of Athanasius of Alexandria* (ca. 370) [translated by Riedeland and Crum, 1904, pp. 43 & 131]

“In the North African, the Milanese, and the Gallican churches the washing of feet also long maintained the place of a distinct sacrament. Ambrose asserted its sacramental character against the church of Rome, and even declared it to be as necessary as baptism, because it was instituted by Christ, and delivered men from original sin, as baptism from the actual sin of transgression; -- a view which rightly found but little acceptance.” – *History of the Christian Church, Volume III: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity. A.D. 311-600*, Philip Schaff, 1882, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library | <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc3.iii.x.xviii.html>

“I, then, wish also myself to wash the feet of my brethren, I wish to fulfill the commandment of my Lord, I will not be ashamed in myself, nor disdain what He Himself did first.” – Ambrose, *Of the Holy Spirit, 1:15*

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/34021.htm>

Ambrose (340-397) in *Of the Holy Spirit* [translated by Schaff and Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, X. p. 95] See also Eerdman's *Handbook to the History of Christianity*, p. 148. He “...endorses it as a symbol of sanctification.” – *The Mennonite Encyclopedia, Vol. 2*, Bender, Gingerich, Krahn, Smith, editors. Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1956, p. 348. See also: *Ambrose: Selected Works and Letters*, Philip Schaff, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.iv.ii.ii.i.html>

“Observed as part of the order of the rite of baptism and confirmation, the seventh in order:

“The washing of the feet (*de Myst.* vi. 31-33; *de Sacram.* iii. 1. 4-7). From *de Sacram.* it appears that the washing was begun by the bishop and completed by the presbyters. The author is aware that the rite was not practised by the Roman Church. It was current, however, in Africa, Spain, Gaul, and Ireland. It is mentioned in a canon of the Council of Elvira (c. 48) at the beginning of the fourth century, and is found in the service books of Gallican and Irish origin (*Missale Gothicum*, *Miss. Gallicanum vetus*, Bobbio and Stowe Missals), as well as in the later Ambrosian rite, represented in the *Manuale Ambrosianum* and Beroldus.

“To this ceremony Ambrose (*de Myst.* vi. 32) appears to assign the same sacramental efficacy with regard to inherited sin as he assigns to baptism with regard to actual sin. The author of *de Sacramentis* silently corrects this teaching by affirming that all sins are washed away in baptism. He sees, however, in the rite a means of sanctification and a lesson in humility. Augustine (*Ep.* iv. (*ad Januar.*) 33) was faced with the danger of attaching to the rite an exaggerated value, and replied that the ceremony was a type of humility, but formed no part of the sacrament of baptism.” – *On the Mysteries* (Ambrose) and the *Treatise on the Sacraments* by an Unknown Author, trans. T. Thompson, ed. with Introduction and Notes by J.H. Strawley, New York: Macmillan, 1919 [http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/StAmbrose0011/Mysteries/HTMLs/0565\\_Pt01\\_Intro.html](http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/StAmbrose0011/Mysteries/HTMLs/0565_Pt01_Intro.html)

Saint John Chrysostom:

456 “...If some clasp the feet of statues, because they bear but a likeness of the king, wilt thou not clasp his feet who has Christ within him, and be saved? The Saints' feet are holy, though they are poor men, but not even the head of the profane is honorable. Such efficacy is there in the feet of the Saints, that when they shake off the dust of their feet, they inflict punishment. When a saint is among us, let us not be ashamed of anything that belongs to him.”

458 "...Tell me then, you will say, whether any one could wash the Saints' feet in the Church? Whether such are to be found among us? Yes: undoubtedly they are such. Let us not, however, when the life of these saints is described despise those that are in the Churches. There are many such often among us, though they are in secret. Nor let us despise them, because they go from house to house, or go into the forum, or stand forth in public...Yet all are called jewels. So it is with the Saints. Some discipline themselves, some the Churches. Paul therefore has well said, 'If she have washed the Saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted.' For he speaks thus, that he may excite us all to imitation. Let us hasten then to perform such actions, that we may be able hereafter to boast that we have washed the Saints' feet. For if we ought to wash their feet, much more ought we to give them our money with our own hands, and at the same time study to be concealed. 'Let not thy left hand know,' He says, 'what thy right hand doeth.' (Matt. vi. 3.)" – *Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy*; From Homily XIV, I Timothy V. 8  
<http://www.saint-mary.net/youth/servprep/SERVICE/POST%20NICENE%20FAHTERS/post13/ECF22.TXT>

"'Let us wash one another's feet,' He said. 'Those of slaves, too?' And what great thing is it, even if we do wash the feet of slaves? For He Himself was Lord by nature, while we were slaves, yet He did not beg off from doing even this..." – *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist* [translated by T. Goggin, 1960, p. 261] (Chrysostom lived ca. 347-407)

Augustine (354-430) [Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, VII.* p. 306] See also Strong and McClintock's *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature, Vol. III*, p. 616. Feet washing "designed to teach brotherly humility and good will..." It was observed "...in early post-apostolic times..." and the "...Anabaptists continued..." the practice, and it is found in the "...Confession of United Baptists in 1660..."

Augustine (in a letter to Januarius, A.D. 400) writes: "As to the feet-washing, since the Lord recommended this because of its being an example of that humility which He came to teach, as He Himself afterwards explained, the question has arisen at what time it is best, by literal performance of this work, to give public instruction in the important duty which it illustrates, and this time [of Lent] was suggested in order that the lesson taught by it might make a deeper and more serious impression. Many, however, have not accepted this as a custom, lest it should be thought to belong to the ordinance of baptism; and some have not hesitated to deny it any place among our ceremonies. Some, however, in order to connect its observance with the more sacred associations of this solemn season, and at the same time to prevent its being confounded with baptism in any way, have selected for this ceremony either the eighth day itself, or that on which the third eighth day occurs, because of the great significance of the number three in many holy mysteries." – *NPNF (V1-01)*, Philip Schaff, New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886; Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library  
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf101.vii.1.LV.html>  
<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102055.htm>

John Cassian (360-435) in *Institute of the Coenobia* [Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second series, XI, pp. 224-25]; "In order that we may not appear to omit any of the Institutes of the Cœnobia I think that it should be briefly mentioned that in other countries as well there is a daily service undertaken by the brethren. For throughout the whole of Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Cappadocia and all the East the brethren succeed one

another in turn every week for the performance of certain duties, so that the number serving is told off according to the whole number of monks in the Cœnobium. And they hasten to fulfil these duties with a zeal and humility such as no slave bestows on his service even to a most harsh and powerful master; so that not satisfied only with these services which are rendered by canonical rule, they actually rise by night in their zeal and relieve those whose special duty this is; and secretly anticipating them try to finish those duties which these others would have to do. But each one who undertakes these weeks is on duty and has to serve until supper on Sunday, and when this is done, his duty for the whole week is finished, so that, when all the brethren come together to chant the Psalms (which according to custom they sing before going to bed) those whose turn is over wash the feet of all in turn, seeking faithfully from them the reward of this blessing for their work during the whole week, that the prayers offered up by all the brethren together may accompany them as they fulfil the command of Christ, the prayer, to wit, that intercedes for their ignorances and for their sins committed through human frailty, and may commend to God the complete service of their devotion like some rich offering." Schaff's footnote: "The custom of washing the feet of the brethren, which Cassian here describes, is also mentioned by S. Benedict." – *Sulpitius Severus, Vincent of Lerins, John Cassian*, Philip Schaff, Edinburgh: T & T Clark; Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library | <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf211.iv.iii.iv.xix.html>

*Apostolic Constitutions* (ca. 400) mentions it in relation to deacons. – Roberts & Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VII, p. 432

Pachomias writing in 404 says that visiting monks and clerics should be received with footwashing. [*Rules*, translated by A. Veillux, Pachomian Koinonia, II, (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), p.153]

Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History* (written circa 440) refers to it in the home of Bishop Spyridon, but evidently in the context of hospitality. [Translated by Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, II. p. 247]

"Visigothic churches in Gaul and Spain practiced feet washing in the 3rd & 4th centuries." – *History of the Church of God* by Sylvester & C. B. Hassell, p. 845

From the fourth century in Spain, Italy and other Latin countries, washing of the feet was commonly performed towards the end of Lent and before baptism. – *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry and Its Kindred Sciences*, Albert C. Mackey, Chicago, IL, New York: The Masonic History Company | <http://www.standrew518.co.uk/ENCYC/MacEncM2.htm>

According to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, feet washing at baptism was practiced in Gaul, Milan and Ireland, but was not known in Rome or in the East. – *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 15, The Encyclopedia Press, Inc., 1913 p. 557

#### A. D. 501-1000

Caesarius of Arles (ca. 470-542): "For if, perchance, we disdain to wash the feet of the saints, we will not merit to have a share with them. Let us rather bend down the feet of the saints or of strangers; because when we fulfill the service of holy humility, indeed we are not merely touching their feet with our hands, but we are cleansing the meanness and filth of our souls through faith and humility, and we are cleansing not only the smallest, but even the most serious of our sins." – *Saint Caesarius of Arles: Sermons*, III, translated by M. M. Mueller, pp. 65-66 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America