

## Customs and Commands – 2

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We are considering how to distinguish an incidental cultural act from a permanent precept in the NT. Last week we examined the kiss of greeting.

### *Foot-washing*

Jesus said to the disciples after washing their feet during the Passover meal, “*If I then ... have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet*” (Jn 13:14-15). Is this a church ordinance or an element of public worship? Should we provide basins and towels and wash each other’s feet upon entry to the church building?

As with the kiss as a mode of greeting, so foot-washing was a preexisting custom as far back as Genesis (Gn 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Lk 7:44). It was necessitated by dusty traveling conditions and inadequate footwear.

“It is a common dictate of good manners to perform this duty to a visitor, either personally or through a servant; at least water for washing has to be presented. This has therefore become almost synonymous with the bestowal of hospitality” (*ISBE* [Orr], p. 1125).

Rather than being an eternal memorial observance like the communion instituted at Passover, Jesus washed the disciples’ feet in response to a particular situation of spiritual weakness: an argument over superiority (Lk 22:24-27; Jn 13:12-16). This was not a matter of edification or worship but correction of competitive pride.

“Christ washed the disciples’ feet as an object lesson in humility. Foot-washing never had significance as a religious rite until so used in Augustine’s time” (*Smith’s Bible Dictionary*, p. 111).

As in the case with the greeting kiss, it is the underlying attitude which is mandated rather than the specific custom under consideration. In every circumstance, pride is to be absent among believers and they are to submit to one another in humility (Ph 2:3-4; Rom 12:10; Eph 5:21; 1 Pet 5:5; Mt 20:27).

But the fact that foot-washing was an established custom does not necessarily exclude it from the Christian system. Immersion, for example, predated the new covenant but was incorporated into the process of conversion.

Consider the silence of the Scriptures in this regard. Suppose the NT placed spiritual significance upon the act of foot-washing itself. If a passage indicated that the act of foot-washing was to remind Christians of the nails driven into Jesus’ feet, one might rightfully conclude that such was intended as a continual observance. But no such passage exists. This silence further indicates the illustrative nature of what Jesus did by use of an everyday custom.

Further, note the qualifications for the enrollment of a widow (1 Tim 5:10). She must be “*well reported for good works*” among which is “*has washed the saints’ feet.*” Thus the practice is characterized as a good work rather than an act of worship. Christianity is short on ritual and long on practical service.