



Conducted by
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"How would you argue with a convinced believer who says that the 'washing of feet' is a literal command to be observed ritually: "Wash ye one another's feet"?"

This question brings into focus once again the vexed discussion of how one should differentiate between custom and command. It is abundantly clear that many commands are given in the Bible which are binding on all Christians for all time; it is equally true that many instructions are given, which *seem* to be in the nature of commands, which are intended for *local* application. If we can differentiate between the two then we shall have performed a real service in the field of Bible study, and we shall, perhaps, rid ourselves of those conflicting ideas which waste so much time in discussion and argument. Probably the best way to deal with this question is to say something about commands and customs, and then to relate what we say to one or two scriptural examples.

COMMANDS

Right at the beginning of his earthly ministry Jesus immediately differentiated between the written legal word, and the spiritual realisation of that written legal word when applied to conduct and behaviour in the New Dispensation. He did this in the so-called Sermon on the Mount. After stating that he had come to fulfil the law and the prophets, he went on, "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (MATT. 5:19, 20). Jesus seems to be teaching the superiority of the new spiritual law over the old law, and also the superiority of the righteousness springing from it. The question we have to ask ourselves is this: does the teaching of Jesus constitute the nature of a commandment?

It seems to me that the teaching of Jesus for the Christian demands a much higher degree of righteousness than did the Commandments of the Old Testament. I am coming to the view that *the whole* of the teaching of Jesus constitutes a command for the successful living of the Christian life, but with certain modifications which I shall mention later. I say this because of the Great Commission which the Lord gave to His disciples; let us just restate it: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: *Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you . . .*" (MATT. 28:19, 20). What we learn from this statement is that the Lord commanded his apostles to observe all the things which he had taught them; the apostles in turn were to teach those who had been baptised to observe all the things which they (the apostles) had been commanded to observe by the Lord. When the Lord sent out the twelve (see MATT. 10) he gave them certain instructions which presumably they had to observe. When he had finished, Matthew records, "And it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and preach in their cities" (MATT. 11:1). So the instructions the Lord gave were in the nature of commands, and we would expect this to be so because Jesus himself taught, "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, He gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that His commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak" (JOHN 12:48-50). I have quoted this at length because it illustrates to me the hierarchy regarding the commandment; God to Christ; Christ to the apostles; the apostles to those who should believe their w

(which was and is in reality, God's and Christ's word). In this connection the teaching of Christ, and the teaching of the apostles, assume a unique importance in terms of obedience to those teachings.

CUSTOMS

It is true to say that custom and practice vary from locality to locality; hence, many customs are by their nature, local customs. We know that the Common Law of England has been built on the foundation of custom and practice over a very long period of time, and even though some customs seem to be exceptions to the general law, they are nevertheless important to the localities which observe them. A local custom, then, seems to be a rule which has gathered the force of law and is binding within a defined area upon the persons affected thereby. Even Pilate, the representative of a mighty empire, recognised the right and effectiveness of custom when he reminded the people that he should release unto them a prisoner at a certain time, and so he released Barrabas to them instead of Jesus. It also seems quite evident to me that Jesus *expected* water with which to wash his feet when he entered the house of Simon the Pharisee; incidentally, he also expected a kiss, and also oil with which to anoint his head (LUKE 7:44-46). This indicates that all of these must have been customs in those localities; the fact that Jesus rebuked Simon for not observing these customs seems to indicate that he considered their observance to be important. So we can perhaps summate this by saying that a custom is something which has existed in a locality for so long that it has achieved the force of law for that locality.

IS FEET-WASHING BINDING ON THE CHURCH?

We are now, I think, in a better position to answer our question, and first of all we have to notice that the church was not yet established when Jesus washed the disciples feet. Secondly, after Christ rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, we never find the practice mentioned as an ordinance of the church after the church was established at Pentecost. It is mentioned once afterwards, not as a church ordinance, but as a 'good work'. In Paul's first letter to Timothy we read, "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" (1 TIM.5:10). This, of course, applies to good works as practiced by widows, but in any case, they are 'good works' and not ordinances which are bound on the church.

In view of what I have said previously, when the Lord said, "Ye ought also to wash one another's feet" (JOHN 13:14, 15) he was not issuing a literal command of universal application such as "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel," but rather he was indicating something which *ought to be done* according to his example and teaching in the localities where such a custom was applicable and had been practiced over a long period of time. So what I am saying is this; if I lived in the Middle East where this practice was prevalent, then I would wash the saints feet if so desired because the Lord had taught me that this would be one way of implementing the main lesson of humility which he taught on that occasion. The stand-point of my argument is this: if the Holy Spirit was to guide the apostles into *all* truth, and if the words which they spoke are spirit-inspired, then those words which they spoke, and which by statement are truth, are *all* of application by *someone* at any given time and under various circumstances. For example, we do not come under the same stricture from Paul as did the Corinthians for holding feasts prior to the Lord's Supper, which feasts the apostle condemned as not worthy of commendation, *but we would come under the same strictures* if we engaged ourselves in such practices.

Similarly, the holy kiss was carried on by early Christians and was a custom of some antiquity especially in the synagogues, where men kissed men and women kissed women when greeting each other.

CONCLUSION

After studying this question for quite a long time my conclusion is this: Feet-washing is not a literal command which was ever bound on the church as a ritualistic ordinance to be carried out by every community of Christians, and it should not be so bound now. It was, however, a local custom which even the Lord expected should be afforded in those localities where it was prac-

ticed and where it was needed, and I tend to the view that it should still be practiced in those localities where it is needed. Similarly, the holy kiss and any other local custom which is normally practiced should be continued in those localities where they have been practiced over a long period of time. If our custom is to shake the hand in greeting, then let us continue to do that in our localities, but never let us be guilty of binding something on the church which neither the Lord nor His apostles have bound on the church.