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## Who gets to wash feet?

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# Who Gets to Wash Feet?

**M**utuality. We talk about it all the time. We consider it the essence of the Gospel and the cornerstone of biblical feminism

But it's hard to live out in our primary relationships. To consider oneself of no more and no less value than any other person, to negotiate with spouse, co-worker, or friend so that each person involved, including the self, has been fairly treated—that is an accomplishment challenging the most entrenched structures of society. It cuts across the grain of human nature itself. It is spiritual warfare with the hierarchical powers of this age.

In this issue we are not dealing directly with larger political systems. Rather, we share the stories of a few unusual people—mostly men—who are working out mutuality in their basic relationships with spouse or co-worker. Reading them one cannot help but see how difficult the task is, how much talking and arranging and even arguing is involved, how easily jealousies crop up, how personal delusions must be faced, and how the ego must humble itself before the other person.

It is no wonder there are good Christian people who believe hierarchy is a God-given organizational structure, and who preach wifely submission because "who shall decide when two people disagree?" We haven't been taught much about negotiation, compromise, or conflict resolution. It is much more natural to either cover up our own feelings and desires, or dominate others so we don't have to deal with how they think and feel.

In his book, *Beyond Sex Roles*, Gilbert Bilizekian makes a number of suggestions for settling split decisions between

spouses or within other primary relationships. Two people committed to the principle of mutual submission can:

- 1) take turns in giving in to the other's preference,
- 2) divide responsibility for decision making on the basis of competencies, experience, and expertise,
- 3) take a course on conflict management to learn how to compromise,
- 4) allow the spouse with more at stake in a decision to have more say in it,
- 5) refer the matter to a trusted third party,

6) articulate one's own position as clearly as possible and then reverse roles to gain empathy for the other person's position. (For more suggestions and details, see *Beyond Sex Roles*, pp. 210–214.)

Working out such mutuality may call for different nuances of behavior for those who have been socialized into dominant roles (more frequently men) than for those trained to be compliant and submissive (more frequently women). For all of us, however, our one role model is Jesus, as Philip Cary notes in his article. In Jesus' role as Master and Lord, he performed "women's work" of washing dirty feet (John 13). On the other hand, as one frail and unarmed human being, Jesus fearlessly took on the religious and political powers of his day, regardless of consequences. Those of us more used to power and leadership must remember to wash feet. Those in subordinate roles must especially imitate Jesus' assertiveness in confronting sinful hierarchy. Our goal is the mutual enhancement of every member in the body of Christ.

—by Reta Finger