
Washing Feet: Preparation for Service

The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics Chapter Thirty-Three

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“You know, we always have footwashing on Lord’s Supper Sundays. And I’ll tell you the truth, I wouldn’t take the Supper if I couldn’t wash feet.” (Duke, 1995, 402)

Perhaps many of us are not surprised to learn that this statement came from a mountain woman, a footwashing Baptist of Appalachia. We expect “this sort of person” to engage in the “primitive” practice of footwashing. But is footwashing a practice for all Christians?

Evidence from the New Testament and the writings of the early Church Fathers indicates that footwashing was both encouraged and practiced within the early Church (see Thomas, 1997, 174). Numerous Christian traditions since have also practiced it (see Knight, 1912). Many today continue to discover why footwashing can be a vital practice of the church. But I suspect that a much larger number do not practice footwashing.

Why have many dismissed footwashing so easily? Has footwashing—and the New Testament text that authorizes the practice—too often been inadequately understood both by those who practice it and by those who don’t practice it? Do those of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus lack stories that demonstrate the significance of such a practice? Might footwashing have anything of significance to say to us about Christian ethics? This essay attempts to move us toward responses to all of these questions.

Footwashing: The Text

An optional mandate?

In his careful and detailed study of John 13, John Christopher Thomas has shown that the practice of footwashing in this passage is mandated more clearly than the Lord’s Supper (Thomas, 1991; 1997, 169-175). Not only does the lengthy narrative of the footwashing appear at a crucial juncture in the Gospel of John, but there is little ambiguity in the central admonition: “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also *ought* to wash one another’s feet” (John 13.14, NRSV). So, why is it that many Christians do not feel that footwashing is mandated in the same way as the Lord’s Supper?

Many of the churches that have practiced footwashing over the centuries have connected it to Maundy Thursday. The term is derived from the Latin, *Mandatum novum*, a new commandment. This new commandment appears in the same chapter, verse 34a: “I give you a new commandment: that you love one another.” I sometimes wonder if it is not the starkness of the two mandates—whether to wash feet or to love—that has been less than alluring to many. Perhaps the Church needs to recapture the rich theological fabric of the text in order to hear the fullness of the Gospel message that is communicated through this narrative.

The presence of Jesus as foundation for redefinition

John 13, like the Gospel of Jesus Christ, like Christian ethics, does not begin with the utterance of a mandate, even one as important as "love one another." No, it begins with the presence of Jesus, the Christ. John begins this narrative by informing us that Jesus knows that his time is short. He will soon "depart from this world and go to the Father" (Jn. 13.1b). Of course his departure will be protracted and painful. Painful not only to him but also to those who have attached their hopes for the future of Israel and of the redemption of the world to him, the one whom they have come to believe is the anointed one, the Messiah. That redemption—or the disciples' understanding of it—will need to be redefined on the far side of the crucifixion of their Savior. Jesus recognizes this need. In fact, that re-definition is already underway, especially around this supper table through the actions of the footwashing Lord and Master.

Jesus can face what lies ahead in Jerusalem because he is confident of his origin and destiny. He knows "that the Father had given all things into his hands" (Jn. 13.3). This confidence, this trust, is vital. Only with such trust do acts reflective of serious commitment make sense. Only with such knowledge can costly repercussions even be imagined as redemptive rather than merely painful. It is this "knowledge" that the disciples still desperately need.

And so, at this key juncture, a short time before he is to face execution, Jesus wants time alone with the inner circle of his disciples. John frames the scene in John 13 with the love of Jesus for his disciples. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn. 13.1b). "Just as I have loved you . . ." (Jn. 13.34b). This is no stranger among them. This is Jesus, the Jesus they know, personally and intimately. It is not as if the enacted parable that is about to unfold will provide new information, but once again, on this redefining evening, Jesus visibly, powerfully demonstrates his love for them. After Jesus shares a meal with them, perhaps his last meal with these close friends, Jesus rises from the table, takes off his outer garment, and ties a towel around himself. He then pours water in a basin and begins to wash the feet of his disciples.

Intimacy and cleansing

Paul Duke alerts us to an aspect of the context that we often miss. He writes of the disciples: "We can feel them squirming. Their embarrassment is palpable, as enacted by Peter. But the dread is not so much centered in how menial an act Jesus has undertaken for them, as in how painfully intimate it is. It is often noted that Jewish slaves could not be required to wash feet, as if it were merely too servile a function. Overlooked is the fact that a man's feet were often washed by his wife or his children or by a welcoming host. An issue of intimate acquaintance seems to apply. The indignity for the disciples resides in their teacher's disarming initiative to touch them in this way, to bring himself so near and naked to their need, to apply himself to their private rankness, to cleanse for them what they would prefer almost anyone else to cleanse."

Duke continues: "No wonder Peter resists. He has signed up to follow Jesus, not to have the unpleasantness down at the foot of his life exposed and handled for him. He prefers the dignity of self-reliance, the fantasy of being heroic. The refusal of his feet to Jesus is precisely

equivalent to his blithe belief that he is ready to follow and lay down his life for Jesus” (Duke, 1995, 399-400).

Like Peter, we too want our dirty feet kept to ourselves. We do not want them exposed, either to Jesus or to His followers. Along with Peter, we are more comfortable with the extraordinary deeds recorded earlier in John’s Gospel. We delight in the extraordinary event in John, chapter two, where Jesus turns plain water into luxurious wine. But, together with Peter, we do not participate without hesitation in the miracle where Jesus turns clear water into dark murky water as He washes our feet. We squirm as he cleanses us of the dirt that accumulates on the soles of our feet and at the center of our lives. But if Jesus is to create a community of disciples who seriously follow him they will need to know that intimacy includes cleansing, vulnerability and forgiveness.

We need this cleansing, this washing, not only once at our Baptism but repeatedly. As Jesus is lovingly present with us, we need his cleansing, we need his washing of the filth that threatens to define our lives. Jesus knows that. Peter has been bathed, says Jesus. But still “unless I wash you, you have no share with me” (Jn. 13.8b).

Servanthood inspires faithfulness

Jesus could have expressed the cleansing of his disciples in any number of ways. However, he chose to express it through the intimate, yet humble act of washing feet, thereby demonstrating a lesson he had repeatedly taught. As we know from other texts, on earlier occasions Jesus had responded to the disciples’ questions about greatness and leadership by contrasting the way he exercised authority with the ways of the Gentile rulers. He said, “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22.27b; also Mark 10.45).

But it is here, shortly before his departure, that Jesus chooses to leave the disciples with a visible image of who he has been, is, and will be among them. He recognizes that although this group of his friends knows who he is—“You call me Teacher and Lord” (Jn. 13. 13a)—they need to know that central to His identity, His identity as Teacher and Lord, is his role as servant. And it is his love, his servanthood, and his sacrifice on their behalf that gives them life that already does and will continue to make their lives of faithfulness, their community of faithfulness, possible.

Karl Barth put it this way: “It is surely worth noting that in the Fourth Gospel the story of the Last Supper is replaced by that of the foot-washing. The material message is the same, but how emphatically the latter emphasizes the fact that the service of Christ is His true power and majesty and therefore the grace by which man receives his life!—the revealed grace of God which was already the secret of the Old Testament, though operative then only in a vertical movement from above. In the New, however, it has really come down into the depths and manifested itself there, becoming itself service in accordance with this end of its way. The action of God which absolutely precedes all human action and therefore human service is that He has placed Himself wholly and unreservedly in the service of man as revealed and effectual in the sacrifice of Jesus” (CD III/4: 476-477). Yes, indeed! Jesus “has placed Himself wholly and unreservedly” in the service of us mere mortals “as revealed and effectual in the sacrifice of Jesus.”

Footwashing and the new commandment

After being reminded of their overall cleansing in Baptism and of the loving and footwashing presence of Jesus, the disciples are ready to hear the New Mandate: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (v. 34). The meaning and shape of this love has just been demonstrated for them in the footwashing they have both witnessed and received. And they have just heard: "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you . . ." (v. 15). Why then do we so readily separate the two mandates? Perhaps this is a good place to remember Barth's observation: "In the fourth Gospel the story of the last Supper is replaced by that of footwashing." Most churches have seen the words "do this in remembrance of me" as a call regularly to repeat the action of eating together. Should the same churches not also hear the words "you also should do as I have done to you" as a call regularly to pick up the towel and basin? Is this not one way to fulfill the call to love one another as Christ has loved us?

And just as the Lord's Supper is not to be divorced from daily life, so here what Jesus is referring to is not simply a re-enactment of his washing of the disciples' feet (although that is not a bad place to begin). He has demonstrated what love is and what it means for them to love each other. It is interesting to note that John 13.34 offers the first positive use of the verb *agapao* (love) for anyone other than Jesus or God in the Gospel of John. The verb has been used negatively three times in relation to humans (3.19; 8.42; 12.43). Also, the only use of the noun, *agape*, in the Gospel has been negative (5.42). It is as if only now—after the cleansing and after the perfect model—that human love can be spoken of positively as something that can bring life and redemption to the community of Jesus.

The community of footwashers

Here in John 13 Jesus is showing them how to have community, a redemptive and loving community. They are to be a community that confesses Jesus as teacher and Lord. They are to know that this Lord gave himself for them. They too are to give themselves to one another. Only so can they be true witnesses to the Great Footwasher. Only so can they know what it means to be in community in His name. Only so can they know what it means to serve and witness to Him in the midst of the world.

Barth summarized it this way: "To serve Jesus (Rom. 14.18, 16.18; Col.3.24), and therefore to serve 'the living and true God' (1 Thess. 1.9), to 'serve him acceptably with reverence and godly fear' (Heb. 12.28), includes the reciprocal service that each should render the other (Gal. 5.13; 1 Pet. 4.10) in submission 'one to another in the fear of God' (Eph. 5.21). . . . To belong to [Jesus], and to perform human action in this relationship, means *eo ipso* and *per se* to take His yoke upon oneself (Mt. 11.29), i.e., to serve and not to rule with Him, in His discipleship, according to His example and in correspondence with His action, and to do so, not in a self-chosen way which might well be a secret path of domination, but in participation in His commission and therefore among men and in the service of men. This is the criterion and test whether it is really the service of God, whether man is really obedient in His active life, whether in his own choice he is really responding to the divine choice and not going his own way and living for himself under the pretext of a self-chosen service" (CD III/4: 477).

Yes, we are called to a life of servanthood, as we follow the True Servant. However, it is not intended to be a life of drudgery. No, Jesus wants us to "know" what he knows, to know our

destiny, our purpose in Christ. So, as Jesus assured his disciples he assures us: "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (13.17).

The narrative ends with a sober reminder. Yes, even in the midst of this holy room, at this sacred time, the disciples, and we, are reminded both of the reality that not everyone will embrace the love of Jesus and of the need for repeated cleansing. Peter, one of the inner circle, will soon deny Jesus (13.36-38)—at least for a time. But more ominously, Judas is present at this event. Judas is a reminder that "the light shines in the darkness" (1.5a). However, it is also vital, at this time approaching the cross, that the disciples know that "the darkness did not overcome it" (1.5b).

What might this text of Scripture mean within the life of the Church? What does the story of Jesus' intimate presence and cleansing, his servanthood and love, and his desire to prepare the disciples for the future teach us? How might individuals be formed by the practice of footwashing in the Church? Let me tell you one story.

Footwashing: A Story

It was the autumn of 1963. I was nine years old. I was with a small group of my friends. The school year was underway. We were happy to be alive. It wouldn't be long before the annual Fall Festival would be in town. There would be carnival rides, steam engines, games, a parade and lots of friends gathered together in one place. (In my small hometown the Fall Festival was one of the highlights of the year.) As we talked we strolled downtown, imagining out loud the transformation that would happen when the carnival set up their equipment on the square. All of a sudden our excitement was eclipsed. We fell silent, each of us looking in the same direction. Then, as with one voice, we said: "if those niggers aren't out of this town by sundown they will be strung up."

I am not sure where we got these words. But our collective gut response to a black family walking around our downtown area probably echoed the sentiments of most of our parents, and the ethos of this proudly all-white community in southern Illinois.

This is a snapshot from my childhood. Of course it is only a snapshot. There were many other realities that shaped who I was. Born in 1953, I was reared watching a considerable amount of television. Certainly my understandings of justice, righteousness, and violence were shaped by "Combat," a drama about World War Two; by "The Rifleman," an emotionally powerful drama about a single father in the "Wild West" of nineteenth-century America who protects his son and his community by killing many a bad man who is trying to do evil things; and by various other Westerns in which good and evil characters were fairly obvious and distinct. (One set of characters was worthy of doing the killing and the other deserving of the killing.)

Also, growing up in this small town, I had a strong sense of community, family, and the importance of friendships. Many different influences in my childhood, each in varying ways, defined my life and my understanding of reality. One shaping influence, however, that was almost completely absent within my childhood, was the Church. My father was fairly obviously not a Christian. And my mother was decidedly not connected to that entity which symbolized her own mother's overbearing religion.

But all of this was to change for me at age seventeen. New birth is quite an appropriate image for what happened to me in the autumn of 1970. It was the beginning of the acquisition of a new identity, a Christian identity. The inauguration of this identity was a dramatic conversion experience in a revival service at the First General Baptist Church of McLeansboro, Illinois. During most weeks over the next two years I attended church services at least three times per week. Various practices of the Church served to re-shape me: Scripture reading (private and public), sermons, testimonies, music, the Lord's Supper, Baptism, glimpses of Christians' lives—and one more which I vividly recall: footwashing.

I still remember Bob and Carlton Brockett on footwashing Sundays. Bob and Carlton were emotionally expressive brothers. Bob was a very big man with rough hands, a laborer on the railroad. He was also a humble and gentle man. When we washed feet, as during testimony services, Bob would almost always cry, confessing his unworthiness as well as his gratitude for the many good gifts God had given to him. He would express deep appreciation for the men standing there, kneeling there, washing one another's feet. These were his brothers in Christ and he was grateful for them.

Carlton could also hardly contain himself. He always wanted to communicate something about the call upon our lives that was entailed by the reality that Christ had washed our feet and had enabled us to wash the feet of others. Carlton's words on footwashing days echoed his words uttered repeatedly during times of testimony, testimonies in which he would call upon all of us to link our lives of praise and worship within a Sunday Church service to the lives we lived during the week.

I also remember the image of my pastor, Bill Duncan, getting down on his hands and knees and washing feet. Bill powerfully preached and embodied the Good News of Jesus Christ. Now in this act he was physically underscoring that message: Christ had given himself for us that we might give ourselves for others.

These intermittent footwashing services underscored, deepened and broadened what I was coming to learn of the Gospel within this Church. Repeatedly I heard sermons assuring me that God loved the world, loved it so much that Jesus died for everyone in the world. God desired that everyone be redeemed. Everyone! God was no respecter of persons. Furthermore, I was learning—through testimony services and songs—that our lives given to worship on Sunday mornings were to be congruous with the way we lived our lives throughout the week. This sense was reinforced through my own reading of the Scriptures and my glimpses of the lives of some of those I knew within this Church. Our lives should echo the gift of salvation we had received, the repeated graciousness of God within our lives, and the call to live lives of faithfulness in whatever we were called to do.

For me this meant, among other things, that when I had to register for military service in October of 1971, I registered as a conscientious objector. At that point in my life I didn't even know the word pacifism. What I knew was that the One who washed my feet called me not only to wash the feet of my brothers and sisters in Christ. He also called me to love my enemies as well as my neighbors.

Some twenty years later, in 1992, I was not only living more than 2000 miles from my hometown, I had also metaphorically traveled a great distance from who I was in 1971. Pacifism, as I learned to name my set of Christian convictions, was rooted in my Christian

faith. My life-long journey of reflections on this peculiar "position" grew out of the realization that love and servanthood were inherent in the Gospel.

Part of my journey during the 20 years since I first became a conscientious objector included learning from and with African Americans. The writings and testimonies of Martin Luther King Jr. and John Perkins deepened my understanding of pacifism, reconciliation, forgiveness, and servanthood. That these extraordinary Christian leaders could simultaneously confront and forgive white people for their profound sin of racism was a testimony to the astonishing power of the Gospel, and of the willingness to live out its implications in daily life.

This was no minor challenge, as my African American friends were to teach me. Glen Perkins, a young black man who shared a home with me for 1½ years, was the son of a man who had for many years been a consistent voice for justice for African Americans. Glen knew about injustice. He was a committed servant of God. Alton Trimble, a Pentecostal pastor, became a significant friend and conversation partner in Los Angeles. He shared with me what it meant to be a black man in Los Angeles. Alton told of how he, a black pastor, dressed in a three-piece suit, driving to a Bible study, was forced by the cops to get down on all fours on the pavement—simply because he is a black man. He told of being under constant surveillance when shopping, again simply because suspicions are attached to him because he is black. Alton's willingness to engage in honest and vigorous exchanges with me during the trial of O.J. Simpson was agonizingly instructive. I live with these stories from my African American friends and have been repeatedly taught about what love, even love of enemies looks like, and what it might cost in real life. Again and again I have marveled at the astonishing power of the Gospel, in their lives and in mine. What a gift they were and are to me!

I tell of these relationships to set the context for an experience I had in the small church I pastored in Los Angeles. Every Maundy Thursday this church would practice footwashing. Several black Christians, including Ralph Ferguson, were members of the congregation. Having come from Alabama, Ralph knew what racism was up close and personal. He would not have been surprised to learn that my childhood included stereotyping and ugly epithets intended to demean people of his color. And yet it never occurred to him—a profoundly Christian man—not to pick up a towel, place my feet, the feet of a white man, in the basin and wash my feet and allow me to wash his. Moreover, it was our practice to embrace after the footwashing. The footwashing and the embrace reminded me that there is cleansing, there is redemption for those of us who have drunk the sin of racism with our mother's milk. Ralph taught me both physically and symbolically that reconciliation is possible, even in our painfully sinful world. The footwashing and the embrace of course are only symbols, but they are potentially potent. This is who Christ has been to us and who we are to be as his followers. So Ralph, a former military Veteran-turned pacifist, believed; so Ralph lived.

Toward the end of 1997 I preached for the first time in over twenty-five years at the same Church in which I became a Christian. In my sermon I mentioned how I had acquired a passion for serious discipleship, peace, and justice—particularly mentioning my convictions against war and racism—from this church, partly through the practice of footwashing. The congregation expressed appreciation for my words. I am delighted that my mother became a Christian and a member of this Church several years ago. I have noted that on several occasions when my mother has been ill, the members of this Church have visited her and taken food to her home. She has also learned to serve in ways she never did before.

I have been fortunate to have many people to help me see the “primitive” Christian practice of footwashing as something luminous, instructive, and vital for the life of the Church. So why is it that this potentially transforming practice has been quite uncommon in much of the Church?

Footwashing: An uncommon practice

Why is it that we so readily participate in Communion, but shy away from footwashing?

Unlike eating bread and drinking wine (or juice), which are common everyday practices in our lives, having our feet washed by others is decidedly not common. As such it presents a far greater challenge to our sensibilities. We immediately sense that this practice includes a touch of intimacy, it exposes our need for cleansing, it reminds us of the call to humility and servanthood, and it moves our love for our sisters and brothers in Christ from a nice idea to a tangible expression. In short, many character qualities, which we praise with our words, are here graphically expressed, reminding us that Christ desires an embodied life in the Spirit.

Yes, footwashing is simply not the kind of ritual that we choose to do because it is pleasant. Unlike the candles, gold-plated chalices, white napkins, and gilded Bibles, and the carefully guided procedures for partaking of the bread and wine, footwashing cannot easily be made beautiful. It is simply earthy, no matter how clean the bowl or crisp the towel. Bending down to wash another person’s feet challenges us on many levels—our dignity, our poise, our position.

Some have argued that because washing each other’s feet, even within intimate relationships, is no longer a common practice, we ought to find an analogous practice within our culture, rather than practicing something so foreign and no longer necessary. They suggest that serving each other in practical, even costly ways, is more useful. Although such acts of service may indeed express that Christ is present among us, there are few ritual acts which combine the dynamic composite of experiences present during footwashing—service, intimacy, humility and the need for cleansing.

So what kind of church practices footwashing? And when, or how often, should this ritual be practiced?

Churches that practice footwashing are likely those that are committed to the components of footwashing in their daily lives and practices. By this I mean, the structures and procedures within the church will reflect servanthood rather than abusive power; the community will practice care for one another throughout the week; there will probably be opportunity for telling and hearing each others’ stories of faith as experienced in daily life; members will know and enjoy the cleansing grace as well as the pain of forgiveness, not only during footwashing but as a necessary part of life; and they will know each other well enough to risk the intimacy of touching each other’s feet. If these qualities are not part of the ongoing life of the church, few people will choose to participate in a footwashing service.

As for the question of when or how often footwashing should be practiced, I am convicted by the story in John 13 to respond: often enough to remind us of who Christ is among us and who we are to be to each other. Although in many traditions, Maundy Thursday has been a natural and in many ways an appropriate time for this practice, perhaps serious reflection ought to be

given to whether once a year is sufficient to remind us of these integral components of following the example of our Lord and Teacher.

If we are tempted to ignore or avoid this uncommon, possibly unpleasant, and in many ways convicting practice, we may need to hear again the accompanying words of Jesus: "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (Jn. 13:17). It is indeed an uncommon, extraordinary blessing to belong to a community of footwashers who are led by a Footwasher.

Footwashing: An Adequate Preparation for the Christian Life

According to John Christopher Thomas, within the cultural context of John 13, the washing of feet was considered an act of preparation. In fact it was such a basic act of preparation—for religious duties, the sharing of a meal, or intimate relationships—that "unwashed feet" had become an idiomatic expression meaning "without adequate preparation" (Thomas, 1991, 59).

Footwashing, properly understood, is indeed adequate preparation—repeated preparation—for Christian living, for Christian ethics. We, all of us, need the gentle repeated cleansing that only Jesus can provide. We need a cleansing that will soothe our aching feet, a cleansing that will remove the filth that attaches itself at the very base of our existence. We serve a compassionate Lord, a teacher whose patience and tenderness beckon us to faithfulness in the midst of a world that He loves and yet a world that sometimes betrays him and even crucifies him.

The resurrected Lord not only continues to wash but also calls his followers to wash the feet of one another, as they learn from him to love, to serve and to live within this world. We need to know that we are not on this journey alone. As willing disciples, we join ourselves to others who, like us, are in need of cleansing and, like us, are extending their hands to wash our feet as we wash theirs. We embrace, knowing we need love, knowing we need forgiveness and care, knowing that if we have "unwashed feet" we are inadequately prepared for the journey of Christian discipleship. Furthermore, we need reminders, embodied acts of faithfulness to beckon us forward in faithfulness. As we rise from the washing of feet we know that we are to "wash feet" in the world through living lives of love and servanthood, testifying to our Lord. We also know we will be enriched and challenged through the lives of other brothers and sisters whose lives are, in their various and complex ways, embodiments of the wondrous love of our footwashing Lord.

Perhaps if we can see footwashing within this broader theological context more of us can grow in our appreciation of its importance. In fact, it might even be that as preparation for faithfulness, many of us will come to say with the Appalachian Baptist: "I wouldn't take the Supper if I couldn't wash feet."

(I want to express gratitude to two people. First, my wife, Mary, gave very generously of her time in editing this essay. She even wrote the section on footwashing as an uncommon practice, beautifully reflecting on what I had tried to say as well as her many years of service in South Central Los Angeles and the practice of footwashing she experienced in the Pasadena Mennonite Church. It is much improved because of her work. Second, Paul Duke's wonderful essay was much more important than one might guess from its length. I went back to it many times as I wrote this.)

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