FOOTWASHING AS AN ORDINANCE

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John 13:1–17 presents three features of footwashing which, when taken in conjunction with the practice of the early church and the implication of 1 Tim 5:10, establish footwashing as an ordinance which should be practiced today. John 13:1–17 suggests that footwashing is a physical act which is ceremonial in nature, that it is a symbolic representation of a spiritual reality, and that Jesus intended it to be perpetuated.

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INTRODUCTION

FOR over 275 years the Brethren have maintained the practice of footwashing as part of their threefold communion service, which also includes the agape and the eucharist. They have maintained that the Lord expected his disciples to perpetuate the practice, whether it is considered a separate ordinance or part of the communion ordinance. Plaster has argued that an ordinance should be characterized by at least these three things: (1) a physical act which is ceremonial in nature, (2) a symbolic representation of a spiritual reality expressly taught in the NT, and (3) a command to perpetuate it by Christ or his apostles.[1] John 13:1–17 will be analyzed from these three perspectives.

A PHYSICAL ACT WHICH IS CEREMONIAL IN NATURE (JOHN 13:1–5)

The Setting (vv 1–3)

Though the Greek text is not certain,[2] the footwashing was probably "during supper" (δείπνου γινομένου, v 2). Weymouth translates, "while supper was proceeding."[3] It should be noted that Jesus "rose

[1]David R. Plaster, *Ordinances: What Are They?* (Winona Lake: BMH, 1985).

[2]Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971) 239.

[3]Richard F. Weymouth, *The New Testament in Modern Speech* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1909).

from supper" (ἐγείρεται ἐκ τοῦ δείπνου, v 4; cf. 13:26). But even if the aorist (γενομένου) is preferred, it could be viewed as ingressive, thus signifying that the supper had been served but was still in progress.[4]

Jesus' Action (vv 4–5)

Jesus removed his outer garments and clothed himself as a servant by donning something like a "loin-cloth."[5] He then washed *all* the disciples' feet, including those of Judas (vv 10–11).

Two aspects of this account suggest that Jesus was doing more than the usual niceties expected of a host in an oriental society.[6] First, the washing occurred after a considerable lapse—not immediately after the guests arrived. Second, the washing took place at the table—not at the door of the house. Some have suggested that Jesus, after the disciples' dispute (Luke 22:24–30), rose from supper and performed the task himself to demonstrate humility to them.[7] They argue that the disciples would normally have taken turns washing each other's feet. Crucial to their argument is the placement of John's account in relation to the dispute between the disciples. And though Robertson places Luke 22:24–30 just before John 13:1–17,[8] Thomas and Gundry offer another chronological reconstruction—one that places John 13:1–7 just after the betrayer was identified:

> Quite possibly this dispute immediately preceded and was the occasion for the example of footwashing (see 213). Yet there seems to be no strong reason for departing from Luke's placement of the argument after the identification of the betrayer.[9]

Since John places the footwashing *before* the identification of the betrayer (John 13:21–30), it is possible that the dispute recorded in Luke 22:24–30 occurred after the washing of the disciples' feet, not before it.

Others suggest that Luke 7:36–50 supports the argument that Jesus was carrying out a social custom which had been neglected in

[4]Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 239.

[5]Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 615.

[6]Cf. William Hendriksen, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954) 2. 228; and Morris, *John*, 612.

[7]Marcus Dods, *The Gospel of St. John* (New York: Armstrong and Son, 1903) 2. 76; and F. Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 2. 247.

[8]A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1922) 190.

[9]Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Chicago: Moody, 1978) 207–11.

this case.[10] While the custom *had* been neglected in the situation described in Luke 7, Jesus was not advocating that the host should have performed it after the meal had begun. He was simply contrasting the treatment he had received from the "sinner" with the treatment he had received from the Pharisee. Jesus did not interrupt the meal to fulfill his duties as a host. The graphic detail and the teaching directed to Peter further demonstrate that this was not a lesson in hospitality nor merely an act of humility.

Conclusion

Can it be concluded that the action of Jesus was ceremonial in nature? As I have shown above, Jesus was not simply carrying out a usual procedure. The significance was greater than the physical act. Neither was the application of truth to a ceremonial act something new to the disciples. God had already done so with the washing of the hands and feet of the Israelite priests (Exod 30:17–21; 40:30–32)—this act too was ceremonial in nature:

> It [the laver] was made of bronze and set aside for ceremonial washing of the priests prior to entrance into the holy place. The symbolic meaning of this laver is indeed significant and precious. It provided for a type of cleansing which served to maintain fitness for a spiritual ministry. The priests' guilt because of sin was dealt with at the altar of sacrifice yet something else was required for effective fellowship and worship in the tabernacle. This had to do with the defilement of sin, that effect of sin which the blood did not remove. Before one could enter the presence of a holy God this had to be cared for. It followed the sacrifice at the altar and was based upon the merit of it but was a definite separate act. So it is with the believer in Christ today.[11]

Footwashing, then, is a physical act which is ceremonial in nature.

A SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF A SPIRITUAL REALITY (JOHN 13:6–11)

Vv 6–11 detail a dialogue between Jesus and Peter. Peter evidently had been watching the Lord as he washed the other's feet and was anticipating his action.

Peter's First Objection (vv 6–7)

Though Peter addressed Christ as "Lord," he had seen him assuming the position of a servant (vv 4–5). Peter objected to this

[10]G. H. C. MacGregor, *The Gospel of John* (MNTC; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928) 274.

[11]John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in the Book of Exodus* (Winona Lake: BMH, 1971) 265–66.

incongruity: "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" (*NIV*). The emphatic σύ μου is significant—"Lord, do *you my* feet wash?" Peter was not prepared to participate in this act of humility and servanthood by his Lord. Jesus informed Peter that, though he would not realize (οἶδας) the complete significance of the act, he would understand (γνώσῃ) later. This probably referred to the time after Pentecost when the Holy Spirit would be teaching them and reminding them of all that Jesus had said to them (John 14:26; 16:13).[12] Since Peter certainly understood the humility involved in Jesus' action, we may assume that more than humility was in view.

Peter's Second Objection (v 8)

The double negative (οὐ μὴ) of Peter's strong prohibition should be noted—"No, you shall never wash my feet." Ironically, "Peter is humble enough to see the incongruity of Christ's action, yet proud enough to dictate to his Master."[13] Peter, though still ignorant of the significance of Jesus' intention, was even more determined that he would not be a part of it. If anything, Peter believed that *he* should have washed Jesus' feet. This reversal of positions was too much to bear. But such a demonstration was not out of character for Jesus, and Peter should have known that (Matt 20:26–28; Luke 22:27).

In response Jesus then began to explain the meaning of the washing. A blending of the spiritual significance and the physical act is expressed: "If I do not wash you, you are not having part with me." The "washing" is related to "having part with me" (note, μέρος / 'share'). Certainly Jesus was not saying that, unless he washed Peter's feet, Peter could no longer have been in the apostolic circle. Since Peter was already a believer, to "have part with Jesus" must have meant to participate in daily spiritual fellowship and intimate communion with him (cf. 2 Cor 6:15). This meaning becomes clearer in vv 10–11 and elsewhere in the NT. The "washing" of which Jesus spoke was the reality of which the footwashing was the symbol. Jesus had advanced from the physical act and had begun to reveal the spiritual significance behind it.

Peter's Third Objection (vv 9–11)

Peter still did not understand the implications of "having part with me." But whatever it meant, he wanted to "have part" with Christ. But he was still thinking of the physical act, and so he objected to a partial cleansing—he wanted a complete bath (v 8). At that point

[12]Morris, *John*, 617; and Hendriksen, *John*, 2. 231.
[13]MacGregor, *John*, 275.

Peter now began to realize that Jesus' action was not just a display of humility—the dialogue between Peter and Jesus clearly put the focus on spiritual cleansing.

Jesus' explanation of the symbolism rests on the oriental background (vv 10–11). "The underlying imagery is perhaps of an oriental returning from the public baths to his house. His feet would contract defilement and require cleansing, but not his body."[14] Or it may refer to the normal practice of people visiting their friends or going to a supper at a banquet hall. Before departing they would bathe, then upon arrival their feet would be washed by a servant at the door.[15] A clearer translation of vv 10–11 would then be:

> "He who has bathed [λούω = full bath] needs to do nothing except wash [νίπτω = wash parts of the body] the feet, but is completely clean, and you [plural] are clean, but not all (of you)." For he knew the one who was betraying him; for this reason he said, "not all (of you) are clean" (cf. *NASB* and *NIV*).

The word "to bathe" (λούω) is employed first in 13:10. The perfect participle ὁ λελουμένος, meaning "he who is bathed," points to the result of a completed action. The focus of this washing is upon sin and spiritual cleansing, especially in view of the last clause of 13:10. John interrupts the narrative in v 11 to add an explanation which clearly underlines this focus.

Therefore, vv 10–11 blend the physical and the spiritual. On the physical level, the one who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, since "his whole body is clean" (*NIV*). Without introduction, Jesus moves to the spiritual level when he declares that they are all clean except Judas, who is unregenerate. On the physical level, the bath makes one clean. On the spiritual level regeneration makes one clean; "the washing referred to is wholly spiritual. It is that of regeneration and renewing, regarded as one concept."[16] On the physical level, one washes only his dirty feet after walking—a complete bath is unnecessary. On the spiritual level, believers are defiled daily by sin as they "walk" in this sinful world—another "bath" is not necessary, though they need the daily cleansing which comes from recognizing sin and confessing it. This is what is meant by "having part with him," viz., participating daily in intimate fellowship with him. Christ in his present ministry of sanctification is applying the Word to believers

[14] *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1969) note to John 13:10.

[15] Morris, *John*, 618; and Hendriksen, *John*, 2. 233.

[16] William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957) 391. Baptism may symbolize the "regeneration bath" which cleanses from the guilt and penalty of sin (cf. Acts 22:16).

and thereby cleansing them—a truth taught expressly later that evening (John 15:2–3; 17:17). The confrontation of the believer with the truth of God's Word convicts him of his sin and brings confession and forgiveness (2 Tim 3:16–17; 1 John 1:9; Eph 5:25–27).

Conclusion

Many of those who do not see footwashing as an ordinance grant that the symbolism and teaching of John 13:6–11 refer to the present work of Christ in sanctification. Hodges even makes the specific connection between the symbolism found in John 13 with the believer's confession of sin in 1 John 1:5–10.[17] But if some physical act is presented as something to be perpetuated, there is more than spiritual symbolism in John 13—there is the description of an ordinance.

THE COMMAND FOR PERPETUATION (JOHN 13:12–17)

John 13:12–17 lays down, in four steps, the command to continue the physical practice of footwashing (which in turn points to the spiritual truth of cleansing). This conclusion finds further support in 1 Tim 5:10 and the practice of the early church.

Jesus' Command

First, the lordship of Christ is stressed as the context for the command (vv 12–14*a*). Jesus begins with a rhetorical question. Of course they knew that he had washed their feet; but did they understand why? Did they know what he meant in his dialogue with Peter? The question sets the stage for the command and forms a transition from "I" to "you." It ties together the physical practice and the spiritual reality to which Jesus was pointing. Jesus emphasized the evidence of his authority. They called him "Teacher" (John 1:38; 3:2; 11:38), and thus identified themselves as his disciples. A "Teacher" in this context is more than one who simply imparts information—the disciple was committed to put into practice what he had heard. They also called him "Lord" (John 6:68; 13:6, 9, 25, 37). Jesus reminded Peter that this title was correct, and upon this basis of authority Jesus gave the command to perpetuate the footwashing ceremony. Thus, his Lordship became the context for the command.

Second, the Lord's actual command (v 14*b*) uses the word "ought" (ὀφείλω), a word used to express moral obligation (cf. 1 John 4:11; Eph 5:28; Matt 18:28). An accurate translation would be "owe" or

[17]Zane Hodges, "Untrustworthy Believers: John 2:23–25," *BSac*, 135 (1978) 146–47. Cf. also *The Ryrie Study Bible* (*NASB*; Chicago: Moody, 1976) note to John 13:14.

"indebted."[18] "You are also indebted to wash one another's feet." The present tense of ὀφείλετε and νίπτειν points to the need to continue or perpetuate the act of washing feet.

Third, the example of the teacher should be imitated by his disciples (v 15). An "example" (ὑποδείγμα) is a model or pattern. It carries the idea of something that encourages imitation,[19] or it can even carry a "double sense,"[20] since it was both an imperfect sketch and a representation of something more perfect.[21]

The comparative καθώς / "just as" does not weaken the sense of the literal example, somehow suggesting that it is impossible to really duplicate Jesus' actions. Others suggest that John would have used ὅ in place of καθώς if he had expected believers to do exactly and literally what Jesus had done.[22] While it may be admitted that the use of the comparative "just as" could mean that believers were to do "as" Jesus did, the comparative adverb is often used to suggest equivalents. For example, it appears twenty-six times in the NT in the introductory formula "as it is written," and an additional twelve times in related phrases. To admit less than exact equivalence in such formulas could imply that God did not quite fulfill that which the Scripture states. Other important doctrines are connected with "just as" when it is used in the sense of equivalence.[23] Even in John 12:49–50 both "the things" (ἅ) and "just as" (καθώς) are used together.[24]

Fourth, obedience was to be evidence of spiritual blessedness (vv 16–17). The emphasis in v 16 is not upon the serving of the slave, but upon the position of the master. It again stresses his authority to do just as he did. Humility is involved, but the picture intended by Jesus involves cleansing more than humility, the latter of which is the proper mindset for the former.

Jesus promises that the man who not only knows "these things" but also does them is blessed. What are "these things?" The passage emphasizes the dual truths of a spiritual reality pictured by a physical

[18]Friedrich Hauck, "ὀφείλω," *TDNT* 5 (1967) 559–66.

[19]BAGD, 844.

[20]Heinrich Schlier, "ὑποδείγμα," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 33.

[21]E. Kenneth Lee, "Words Denoting 'Pattern' in the New Testament," *NTS* 8 (1962) 168; cf. also L. D. Hurst, "How 'Platonic' Are Heb. viii.5 and ix.23f.?" *JTS* 34 (1983) 156–68. See Heb 8:4–5, 9:23, and 2 Pet 2:6 for other exx.

[22]Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1945) 3. 317–18; and Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1893) 266.

[23]Several examples can be cited from John's writings: John 5:23 and the deity of Christ; John 8:28 and the accuracy of Jesus' words; John 10:15 and the deity of Christ; and John 15:9 and the love of Christ and the Father.

[24]In every other case in the NT where καθώς is used following the verb ποιέω there seems to be a comparison of equivalents (cf. Matt 21:6; Luke 6:31).

practice. "Washed" is used in two senses in this passage—both for a reality and for its symbol. The man who understands and does both is blessed. He appropriates the cleansing work of Christ as he confesses sin, and he also practices the symbolic ordinance which points to the present work of Christ. Therefore, footwashing must be practiced in order to fulfill this command. This command cannot apply only to the actions of believers in forgiving, loving, or serving one another. Humble service to another believer does not completely fulfill the command of v 14. Believers are not free to choose between the spiritual truth and the physical practice. Both are set forth together. In v 14 Jesus is talking about the literal act which he had just performed. He calls it an "example," something which points to a physical, literal example of a spiritual reality. It is the physical act which he commands. Other than the possible exception of v 14*b*, the phrase "wash feet" always refers to a literal, physical act. (A reference to feet is omitted in 13:8 because the spiritual reality was the focus. But this is not the expression in 13:14.) The fact that believers are commanded to wash each others' feet does not necessarily support the contention that loving or serving one another was being commanded. The believer's role in footwashing is not unlike a pastor's role in baptism, since any part the believer plays in this cleansing work is as Christ's instrument—he cannot accomplish the cleansing! Just as the cleansing of regeneration is an act of God pictured in baptism, so also present sanctification is an act of God pictured in footwashing.

1 Timothy 5:10

In light of the clarity of John 13:1–17, the evidence from 1 Tim 5:10 is ancillary (i.e., epistolary verification is not required in order to establish an ordinance).[25] The structure of 1 Tim 5:10 suggests that "having a reputation for good works" is a general quality explained by the five specific qualities which follow, the last one emphasizing the general quality once again. The reference to washing feet is sometimes understood as just a further explanation of "hospitality to strangers" or just "showing hospitality" (*NIV*).[26] But if that were Paul's intention, he was being redundant—the social custom of washing feet would have been viewed as a part of hospitality and would not have merited specific mention.

Nor is this to be understood as a display of humility accomplished through the performance of a social custom.[27] If this were so

[25]Plaster, *Ordinances*, 74–75.

[26]E. F. Scott, *The Pastoral Epistles* (MNTC; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936) 61.

[27]Ibid.; and D. Edmond Hiebert, *First Timothy* (Chicago: Moody, 1957) 96.

it would be difficult to understand why "the saints" are specifically mentioned. "Hospitality" and "washed" are not to be taken as parallel references to unbelievers and believers, respectively. The first phrase (translated "showing hospitality" by the *NIV*) need not refer only to strangers. Even if "strangers" are in view, one believer who is unknown to another could qualify as a "stranger," since many believers were travelling missionaries and evangelists. Furthermore, footwashing would not exhaust the responsibilities of hospitality. And finally, it is doubtful that only the social custom is in view since the guest himself or a servant—not the woman of the house—would normally wash the feet.[28]

In this context of emphasizing godly character (5:9–10), Paul lists the practice of the ordinance of footwashing as a mark of godliness and spirituality, because,

> obedience to this particular command . . . displays a comprehension of a precious spiritual truth, and it asks the individual to exert himself toward that which may be inconvenient and a bit humbling. The early church also thought that washing the saints' feet was indicative of a godly life, for it was made a factor to be considered when widows were evaluated as recipients of aid.[29]

Tertullian, in listing the various distinctively Christian practices to which an unbelieving husband might object in his wife, also separates hospitality from footwashing.

> For who would suffer his wife, for the sake of visiting the brethren, to go round from street to street to other men's, and indeed to all the poorer, cottages? Who will willingly bear her being taken from his side by nocturnal convocations, if need so be? Who, finally, will without anxiety endure her absence all the night long at the paschal solemnities? 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*? to snatch (somewhat for them) from her food, from her cup? to yearn (after them)? to have (them) in her mind? If a pilgrim brother arrive, what hospitality for him in an alien home? If bounty is to be distributed to any, the granaries, the storehouses, are foreclosed.[30]

The chronology of events in the NT also points to a possible trend that affected later church history. On the night before he was

[28]Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1982) 167.
[29]Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Light in the Darkness* (Winona Lake: BMH, 1974) 169.
[30]Tertullian, *To His Wife*, 8. Emphasis mine.

crucified, Jesus commanded footwashing. Paul then suggested footwashing as part of the "test" for a widow to ascertain whether or not she deserved the support of the church. Perhaps there was already a tendency to neglect footwashing. If John was written late in the first century, as is commonly believed, it is perhaps understandable that footwashing is emphasized. Could this have been a corrective to a trend of neglect?

Church History

There is little information regarding the practice of footwashing in the early church. However, the data does indicate that the practice was known and carried out in some quarters. Tertullian (A.D. 160) pointed to footwashing and to the materials used by Jesus. Some saw a connection between these articles and the items considered sacred to pagan gods, yet Tertullian still maintained the need for their use by believers.

> I must recognize Christ, both as he reclines on a couch, 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 that I reply upon the point, admitting indeed that *we use along with others these articles*.[31]

In his comments on John 13, Augustine (A.D. 320) calls footwashing a sign instituted by the Lord. In his *Letter to Januarius* he discusses the point at which "it is best by literal performance of this work to give public instruction in the important duty which it illustrates."[32] Even the recorded opposition to the practice of footwashing is an indication that there were churches which were practicing the ordinance.[33]

CONCLUSION

The practice of footwashing, then, meets the criteria necessary for defining it as an ordinance. The command of John 13:1–17 ties together both the spiritual reality and the physical act which is to symbolize it. Believers should carefully consider the evidence presented above—if footwashing is an ordinance, it should be practiced. "If you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (John 13:17 [*NIV*]).

[31]Tertullian, *De Corona*, 8. Emphasis mine.

[32]Augustine, *Second Letter to Januarius*, 18. 33.

[33]C. F. Yoder, *God's Means of Grace* (reprint; Winona Lake: BMH, 1979) 343. Yoder refers to the canons of the Council of Elvira, A.D. 307.