

FOOTWASHING - THE FORGOTTEN SACRAMENT?

*"Now that I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet."
(John 13:14)*

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At the Last Supper, as we read in the Synoptic gospels, Jesus by His symbolic act of breaking the bread and sharing the wine, instituted the practice of the Eucharist, which He commanded His Church to continue to celebrate in remembrance of Him. In almost all Christian churches this has been obediently done, with greater or less frequency, throughout history.

Immediately prior to His Ascension, Jesus gave another command : "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them..." (Matthew 28:19). This command to baptise has likewise been obeyed with relatively few exceptions by the Christian Church throughout history.

In John's gospel, however, the story of the Last Supper is differently told. Nothing is said of the Eucharist. Instead John tells us in vivid detail how Jesus symbolically washed His disciples' feet and commanded them to do likewise. And the New Testament church apparently did (1 Timothy 5:10). However with few notable exceptions such as some of the black gospel churches today, some house churches and some historic Maundy Thursday traditions, this command has very largely been ignored by the Christian Church ever since.

The reason is hard to understand. Jesus' command to wash each other's feet is every bit as emphatic as that to remember Him in the Eucharist; more so, in fact, given the interchange when He told Peter "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me". It is difficult to see how the importance of this practice could have been spelled out any plainer. Yet today the vast majority of us continue to do otherwise. It is sad.

By disobeying Jesus' command we impoverish ourselves. There is so much power in the loving, delicate act of washing the feet of another. Feet are sensitive. Feet are often tired. Feet are dirty. Feet are smelly. They need loving, stroking, massaging, caring for. It is very difficult to wash the feet of someone with whom we are at odds. Doing so gives us the opportunity to come back into line. Few Church Councils, I suspect, would not yield to this treatment!

All feet are equal. An archbishop's feet are as important as those of a tramp. There is too the dynamic of humility. In the kingdom of heaven the greatest and the least swap places, as Jesus took pains to reiterate on the same occasion. The greatest is the one who first dons the towel - whose privilege is this going to be ? There will be life and laughter among the saints as they seek to outdo one another in love. There will be holiness in the church where humility comes to the fore, where the desire to serve in the most menial way reintroduces Christ into our relationships.

It is humbling to allow someone else to wash one's feet. Some will be angry; some will refuse to submit; some will walk out. All will be given ample opportunity to examine afresh the terms of their discipleship. For many, like Peter, there will be a rededication to the will of the Master.

There is also, as I have personally experienced, a healing power associated with this act, just as there is with the Eucharist.

We are offered a practical way of reintroducing life and commitment to serving one another within the church; a way of resolving tensions, of restoring fun and humour; a way of establishing true leadership from humility and service; of making the Church utterly unique and distinct from every other body on earth; a sacramental way of bringing down rich blessings upon the people of God.

It is frequently suggested in response to this thesis that since the washing of feet is not a part of western culture, Jesus' command is adequately met by other acts of service such as making coffee for one's guests or doing the washing up. It seems to me that none of the suggested alternatives begins to match the original in terms of either the humility demanded or the personal intimacy involved.

It may come as a surprise to learn that in Bible times footwashing was not as a general rule done by servants. Instead it was the duty of the host to provide water, with which the guest would wash his

own feet. Examples are to be found in Genesis 18:4, 19:2, 24:32, 43:24, and Judges 19:21, the only counter-example known to me being 1 Samuel 25:41. In Luke 7:44 Jesus makes plain that this is what he himself would have expected, even at the house of a wealthy Pharisee. It would appear that this task was for the most part considered either too lowly or too personal for even a servant to do.

I conclude that western culture knows NO equivalent act to footwashing in these two respects, in which case our only way of obeying Our Lord's command is to do so literally.

Further, to the objector who rules out footwashing on the ground that it is foreign to western culture, I want to reply, "How do you feel about the Holy Communion?" Millions of Christians all the world over partake each Sunday of what they believe to be (either actually or symbolically, depending on their point of view) the body and blood of Christ. This act of simulated cannibalism has no ancestors but itself in our western culture. Yet Jesus said "Do this", and so we do it.

The Jewish people at least had the Passover feast to provide a context for the Lord's Supper. Gentile Christians have no such background within their culture and yet nevertheless continue obediently to partake. The objection to footwashing on the grounds that it is foreign to our culture would if valid also rule out celebrating the Eucharist. I conclude that obedience in the one case necessarily implies obedience in the other.

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"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news." (Isaiah 52:7)

Martin Mosse,
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