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The Significance of the Foot Washing in John 13:1-17

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF
THE FOOT WASHING IN JOHN 13:1-17

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of New Testament Exegesis
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Definition of the Problem

The object in writing this thesis was to get down to the real meaning of the words and action of Jesus in the foot washing of His disciples. The problem was primarily whether Christ had given to His Church a sacred ordinance that He expected His followers to observe after His ascension, or whether we were really free from any obligation to a specific rite in connection with Christ's command in John 13: 14 f. The problem is significant since there have been and still are large numbers of Christians that observe the custom of foot washing as a very sacred ordinance. In attempting to answer this question several additional problems appeared in connection with the interpretation of Jesus' words in His conversation with Peter. Particular emphasis was placed upon verse ten.

Method of Procedure

In an effort to arrive at the real significance of the foot washing of Jesus, we shall first discuss the place of this custom in the culture of the Jews. The different practices of foot washing that were familiar to those people will be presented with the purpose to shed light upon Jesus' action. The interpretation of the foot washing and its

significance to the disciples and to the later Christians who attempted to understand Christ's action will then be discussed, followed by a summary statement of what seems to be the real meaning of Christ's explanation. Various reasons will be presented to show why foot washing has not become a familiar practice in the Lutheran Church, and also why Christians are not obligated to understand the command of Christ in a literal fashion. The final chapter will present a brief historical sketch of the custom of foot washing as it was observed or not observed in the Christian Church from early times to the present day.

This paper in no way claims to have solved all the problems; however, it does present the problems and attempts to achieve a reasonable explanation both to the interpretation of Christ's act and words and the obligation that Christ's command places upon us. Not all of the scholarly works that deal with the subject could be used. But a representative group of the works that were available are included as sources in this study.

CHAPTER II

THE FOOT WASHING IN ITS SETTING

Foot Washing in General

In the first place, foot washing was a necessity because of the very nature of the region which these people inhabited. The hot, dry, dusty climate required frequent bathing for hygienic reasons as well as for personal comfort. Furthermore, with specific reference to the feet, the common foot covering was only a sole with a strap across the top of the foot. Dust and grime could and did quickly accumulate upon the feet of a person as he went about his daily activities. Naturally, when he returned to his home, or when he came to the home of a friend, he would want his feet washed, especially since no shoes of any kind were usually worn within the house.¹

Thus it becomes obvious, in the second place, why foot washing became a mark of true hospitality.² It was the host's way of making a guest feel at home. The Bible gives us several examples of the courtesy of foot washing extended to guests even though they were strangers. In Gen. 18:3 f.

¹G. H. Hirsch, "Washing of Feet," The Jewish Encyclopedia, edited by Isidore Singer (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1907), V, 357.

²Ibid.

Abraham, inviting his visitors, said, "Pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant: let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet." Similarly, Lot entreated the two angels to remain and to "wash your feet" (Gen. 19:2).³

On the other hand, it was a distinct mark of discourtesy and unfriendliness on the part of the host who failed to provide water for the washing of his guest's feet. Jesus Himself commented on the neglect of Simon the Pharisee in failing to provide this common courtesy, water for the washing of feet (Luke 7:45 f.). While apparently the guest generally washed his own feet with the water that was provided, in a wealthier home servants were often employed to perform this menial task. But the greatest mark of hospitality was when the host himself washed the feet of his guests.⁴ 1 Sam. 25:41 describes Abigail's response to the messengers of David with, "And she arose, and bowed herself on her face to the earth, and said, 'Behold, let thine handmaid be a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord.'" In this way she demonstrated her willingness to do anything for her guests, displaying her true humility.

This condescension, humility, and self-abnegation on the part of the one who washed the feet appears to be the main

³Cf. Gen. 24:32; 43:42; Judges 19:21.

⁴G. A. Frank Knight, "Feet Washing," Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, edited by James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), V, 815.

picture in the background of Jesus' washing the feet of the disciples. It is recognized as being a most menial task, fit only for slaves. Peter's own shocked response to Christ's action is a further indication that this was one of the lowliest tasks that man could perform (vv. 6 and 8).

Though foot washing was a common custom among the Jews, it was not demanded of the people as one of the necessary rites of purification listed in the Bible. However, a very rigid and a very definite requirement was laid down for the priests in Ex. 30: 19 ff., namely, that the priests dare approach the altar and perform the services of the tabernacle only with washed hands and feet "that they die not." Rabbinic tradition indicates that the priests were accustomed to rub and to wash their hands and feet twice to insure the proper degree of cleanliness.⁵

Since the washing of feet was such a common and even necessary custom, when one abstained from washing his feet he indicated to his fellow men that he was in mourning (2 Sam. 19:24).

One further aspect of foot washing must also be mentioned: foot washing in connection with the marriage ceremony. Knight⁶ gives many different ethnic customs in connection with the foot washing as part of the marriage

⁵Hirsch, loc. cit.

⁶Knight, op. cit., pp. 822 f.

ceremony itself, or as part of the pre-nuptial activities. While there are some comic adaptations of the custom of foot washing in rural England and Scotland, it is a far more serious procedure in many of the Oriental countries. It is particularly common in India. There the act is sometimes repeated several times on the wedding day as a part of the festive preparations, as an act of the bride upon the feet of her husband to demonstrate her acceptance of his lordship, or by the bride's parents who wash the feet of the groom.

That any of these wedding customs existed among the Jews is doubtful. The Jewish Encyclopedia⁷ lists the clearest reference in connection with the duties of a wife:

This [the washing of feet] was the service the wife was expected to render to her husband; according to Rabbi Huna, it was one of the personal attentions to which her husband was entitled, no matter how many maids she may have had.

This duty, however, had no connection with the marriage ceremony, and therefore there is no evidence that foot washing was connected with the wedding ceremony among the Jews as it was in other countries.⁸

It can hardly be denied that foot washing was a necessary custom both for comfort and for cleanliness, and it must also be admitted that one who washed another's feet was performing a very humble service; yet these statements do

⁷Hirsch, loc. cit.

⁸Infra, p. 31.

not eliminate the possibility of a symbolic or even sacramental characteristic of the foot washing among the Jews. The close connection between bodily cleanliness and spiritual purity should not be overlooked (Ex. 30:19 ff.). This interaction is brought out in the article on foot washing in M^cClintock and Strong:⁹

In general, in warm Oriental climes, cleanliness is of the highest consequence, particularly as a safeguard against leprosy. The East knows nothing of the facetious distinctions which prevail among us between sanitary regulations and religious duties; but the one as much as the other is considered a part of that great system of obligations toward God under which man lies. . . . Cleanliness is, in consequence, not next to godliness, but a part of godliness itself.

The evidence that has been presented so far, while it does not establish any sort of spiritual interpretation to the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus, in no way excludes that possibility.

The Foot Washing in the Upper Room

The foot washing that is of significance to us has its own setting in that upper room where Jesus and His disciples celebrated the Passover supper.¹⁰ A study of some of the

⁹"Foot-washing," Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, edited by John M^cClintock and James Strong (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1894), III, 615.

¹⁰For a discussion of the date of the Last Supper, see Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1947), II, 481 ff.

details of John's account is necessary to shed light upon the meaning of Jesus' action.

The first verse of chapter thirteen sounds the key note for the entire account. In close connection are mentioned Jesus' knowledge and His love. He knew what lay ahead for Him, but He also loved, He loved those whom the Father had given to Him (Cf. John 17). John also indicates the extent of that love, not that He loved His disciples to the end in point of time, but that He loved them to the fulfillment of the goal of His life, to the accomplishment of His purpose. He loved them to the very uttermost, to death for them on the cross.¹¹ Bruce emphasizes, in addition, the constancy of Christ's love for His disciples all through His life. The greatness of that love is indicated by the fact that His love included the betrayer, Judas; loving him He washed also his feet. Though Jesus knew, according to verse four, that "the Father had given all things into his hands," actually making Him Lord of all, yet His love compelled Him to carry out His Father's plan for the redemption of man.¹²

Whether the supper was completed when Jesus rose to wash the disciples' feet, as the King James translation implies,

¹¹J. H. Bernard, "A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of John," International Critical Commentary, edited by A. H. McNeile (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1929), II, 455.

¹²Alexander Balmain Bruce, The Training of the Twelve (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1929), pp. 342 f.

or whether ΔΕΙΠΝΟΥ ΓΙΝΟΥΜΕΝΟΥ or ΓΕΝΟΜΕΝΟΥ can refer to an earlier time has caused some discussion. The question is, if the supper was over when the foot washing occurred, how can that be harmonized with the usual custom of foot washing? Luke (7:36 ff.) shows that the washing of feet was one of the first activities performed upon the arrival of the guests. Bruce, recognizing this incongruity, presents a strong case that ΔΕΙΠΝΟΥ ΓΕΝΟΜΕΝΟΥ (following the textus receptus) can also mean "supper time having arrived." He points to the sequence of events, which seem to show that the foot washing was one of the very first things that happened in the upper room. He also calls attention to the use of this participle in just this way. Matt. 26:6 uses this participle to say "Jesus was in Bethany"; Mark 6:2 says, "and it being the Sabbath"; and John 21:4 gives the best parallel, "but when the morning was come."¹³ Knight gives a similar interpretation, proposing three alternatives: "at supper time," or "supper being served," or "when supper was about to begin."¹⁴ This last translation would well render the reading ΔΕΙΠΝΟΥ ΓΙΝΟΜΕΝΟΥ of Nestle's text.

These possibilities show that the foot washing more than likely took place at the traditional time, before the meal itself got under way.¹⁵

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Knight, loc. cit.

Another question that arises is what caused Jesus to perform this menial task? Bruce feels that some misbehavior on the part of the disciples, whom Jesus was trying to train, occasioned Jesus' action. He notes that in Luke (22:24 ff.) is recorded what might be termed the occasion of Jesus' lesson. The disciples were arguing among themselves "which of them should be accounted the greatest." This dispute may have been aroused by the mention of the Kingdom (Luke 22:16), or by the arrangement of seats, or by the necessity for one of them to help serve the meal. Not one of them would condescend and willingly take a lower position. Hence, Jesus, by washing their feet, assumes the very lowest position and demonstrates to the disciples what true condescension implies.¹⁶

Edersheim accepts this interpretation as a matter of fact.¹⁷ The real sequence of events, however, is difficult to determine.

There are those who have also attempted to ascertain the order in which Jesus washed the feet of the disciples. Edersheim has managed to diagram the layout of the whole

¹⁵Edersheim essentially agrees with this interpretation, indicating that the foot washing followed the "first cup," which was very preliminary, but he says that the foot washing is a transformation by Jesus of the traditional hand washing of the head of the feast following this first cup. Op. cit., 498.

¹⁶Bruce, loc. cit.

¹⁷Edersheim, op. cit., p. 496.

room, assigning a place to Peter, John, and Judas in relation to Jesus. He places Peter at the end, on the far side of the table where he is directly across from John to whom Peter later whispers (John 13:21). Since he is at the end of the table, and since Edersheim cannot imagine Peter waiting till the very last before objecting to the foot washing (vv. 6 and 8), he concludes that Jesus must have washed Peter's feet first.¹⁸ Hoskyns quotes three opinions on this matter from the Fathers: Chrysostom said that Judas was first; Tertullian said that Peter was last because he needed it the least; and Augustine said that Jesus began with Peter because he was the chief of the apostles.¹⁹ Goebel, however, points out that the words indicate that Peter was probably not the first one to be washed. His turn came as he sat in line, thus the simple words: "He began to wash, and (as He was washing) He came to Peter."²⁰ Probably the most sane approach to this question is that of Bruce, who acknowledges that "we don't know who was first," and he adds, "but not surprising is the fact that Peter speaks first."²¹

¹⁸Ibid., p. 499.

¹⁹Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, The Fourth Gospel, edited by Francis Noel Davey (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), p. 438.

²⁰Siegfried Goebel, Die Reden Unseres Herrn Nach Johannes (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertlesman, 1910), II, 51.

²¹Bruce, op. cit., p. 344.

This then is the setting in which the story of the foot washing occurs: in a dry, dusty, dirty country where foot washing becomes a necessary habit, yet a custom which has religious overtones and demonstrates a close connection between hygienic cleansing and spiritual purity. This custom is now performed by the Lord of love at His last supper upon the feet of twelve selfish, proud disciples. What did the Lord's action mean? The following chapter will attempt to present the most important interpretations of the foot washing and the words which Jesus spoke.

CHAPTER III

AN EXAMINATION OF THE WORDS OF JESUS

The story of the foot washing in John 13 shows Jesus in true humility preparing His disciples for the final act in the establishment of Christ's Kingdom. This passage confronts us with various implications of what Jesus intended to reveal to His disciples through the foot washing. The lesson in humility that Christ gives to His disciples is the obvious bit of instruction that appears at the first reading. But is it only a lesson in humility? Scholars through the ages have seen in this passage on foot washing evidence of other doctrines that Jesus also taught.

It appears that the crux of the problem lies in the tenth verse of the thirteenth chapter where Jesus makes a statement to Peter that has resulted in endless discussion and speculation. The problem is especially difficult since the text is uncertain. Jesus says in reply to Peter, "ὁ λελουμένος οὐκ ἔχει χρείαν εἰμὴ τοὺς πόδας νίψασθαι. He who has been bathed needs no washing except for his feet." The discussion centers around washing and bathing, the two key words being *λελουμένος* and *νίψασθαι*, and the study of these two words will be the first part of this chapter, followed by a discussion of the words *εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας*. The various interpretations of Jesus' words will then be presented.

Λελουμένος and Νίψασθαι

The Greek verb **λούω** has a very specific meaning. It does not simply mean any kind of washing, but it refers to a bath, a washing of the whole body. There is a distinct contrast between the total washing of **λούω** and the partial washing of **νίπτω**, which refers only to the washing of the hands, feet, or face. The word **λούω**, for instance, is the verb used to describe the washing of a body after death (Acts 9:37). However, both **λούω** and **νίπτω** stand in contrast to **πλύνω**, which refers simply to the cleansing of an inanimate object, whereas **λούω** and **νίπτω** usually refer to the cleansing of the body. In the words of this tenth verse, however, Jesus is contrasting the full, complete bath with the partial washing, which is here a washing of the feet.¹

The exegetes often find a ritualistic or sacramental meaning in the words of Jesus in this verse. The question then arises, do these verbs permit such an interpretation, referring then to a spiritual cleansing? If it could be shown that the verbs used for washing in this verse are usually used in a sacrificial or ritualistic sense, there

¹Friedrich Hauck, "**νίπτω**," Theologische Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1933), IV, 945. See also Albrecht Oepke, "**λούω**," ibid., pp. 297 f.

would then be a stronger case for such a spiritual interpretation. It could then be conclusively established that Jesus had in mind more than a mere lesson in humility. Ample information is presented in the Strack-Billerbeck commentary regarding the Rabbinic use of *vitru* in connection with the ritualistic hand washing at the Jewish feasts. On important occasions there was a symbolic hand washing before the guests assembled at the table. This took place in another room, and only one hand, usually the right one, was washed.² During the meal there were at least two commanded hand washings and often a third was added. Greatest care was taken to provide water of the correct temperature at the proper time. Directions were provided for the manner in which the hands were to be washed, and even the order in which the guests were to be washed was carefully specified.³ For the Jews such washing was of the utmost importance because man could approach the Holy One only after being bathed, or at least with washed hands, for prayer and sacrifice. Eventually, however, this ritual cleansing became more important than the purity and godliness which it was supposed to symbolize.⁴

²Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck, "Exkurse zu Einzelnen Stellen des Neuen Testaments," Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlags Buchhandlung, Oskar Beck, 1928), IV, 616.

³Ibid., pp. 620 ff.

⁴Hauck, loc. cit.

Strack-Billerbeck offers evidence that *νίπτω* was used for the Hebrew *שָׁטַף* and implied a ritualistic washing or ablution, and as it has been indicated, it became Rabbinic law, a ritualistic necessity, and a religious duty in connection with their meals.⁵ Such Old Testament passages as Ex. 30:18 f., Deut. 21:6, Psalm 25:6, 2 Chron. 4:6 offer very strong evidence that this verb was used in the Septuagint to describe a cultic washing.

The usage of *νίπτω* in the New Testament is inconclusive since it is used of a simple washing in two instances (Matt. 6:17, John 9: 7 ff.), and the same number of times it refers to a ritualistic washing (Matt. 15:2, Mark 7:3). All the other references refer to the washing of feet (John 13:5 ff., 1 Tim. 5:10), the meaning of which, on the basis of such meager evidence, can hardly be definitely established. Though there is a possibility of a spiritual interpretation of *νίπτω* as used in this foot washing account, there is insufficient evidence to base a spiritual interpretation on this one word alone.

There is evidence that also *λούω* at times has a ritualistic meaning and is a word that often had the meaning later given to *βαπτίζω*. It is evident, at any rate, that bodily cleansing played an important part in Jewish cultic observances. Often other terms are used, but cleansing is emphasized in one way or another. What today is

⁵Strack, op. cit., I, 695 ff.

generally termed necessary or self-evident bathing, such as the washing of a corpse, the monthly bathing of a woman, the bathing of a new born babe, and even the preparation of the priest for duty, more than likely included ritualistic significance. The laws of purification had to be fulfilled. In this connection Oepke concludes, "In den meisten Fällen bezeichnen unsere Vokabeln das Baden zum Zweck ritueller Reinheit."⁶

In the New Testament there is only slight evidence that *λούω* is used in such a ritualistic way. The word itself appears five times in the New Testament, but two of those instances rule out a ritualistic connotation (Acts 16:33, 2 Peter 2:22). There is a possible sixth reference in Rev. 1:5 where some of the texts insert *λούσαντι* instead of *λύσαντι*. Apparently *λύσαντι* is better substantiated, but nevertheless, it is an indication that a part of the church did speak of such a "washing away of sins." In Hebr. 10:20 is the most definite reference to a spiritual washing. It is worth-while noting the close connection to the blood of Christ and the cleansing that is accomplished in Him, as the preceding verses describe it, following which comes the statement: "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water."

⁶Oepke, op. cit., p. 302

The conclusion of this word study is, therefore, that a ritualistic interpretation of both of these words is possible, though it is not the only possibility. It has been shown that these words are used quite often to signify a far greater meaning than the simple routine washing of the daily life. Therefore, the sacramental interpretations that many exegetes give to verse ten of this chapter are not ruled out by the choice of words that Jesus made, rather it seems highly probable that these words include more than the simple washing which took place that night of His betrayal, and there can very easily be included the thought of Christ's constant cleansing of these men in all His contacts with them.

In this connection it should be noted that the Roman Church has regularly referred lotus, the Latin word for λελουμένος, to Baptism, giving it a very definite sacramental implication. Augustine and Alcuin are only two of many who thought of it in this way.⁷ However, the testimony of latin scholars is not always given too much consideration.⁸

εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας

The variant reading in verse ten is also important, for

⁷N. M. Haring, "Historical Notes on the Interpretation of John 13:10," Catholic Biblical Quarterly (Oct. 1951), p. 365.

⁸Ibid.

upon it hinges, for most commentators, the interpretation of the whole discourse of Jesus with Peter. The problem is basic, for if one reads the verse with the phrase *εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας* included, it means that an additional cleansing is needed besides an earlier complete cleansing, and the earlier cleansing then can hardly be termed complete. If the phrase is omitted, it strengthens the first washing, namely, that "he who has been bathed" is really thoroughly cleansed and "has no need for a partial washing."

Most of the manuscripts, and probably the more important manuscripts, favor the longer reading. From the testimony of the Greek texts it appears that the longer reading was included in the original text. The Hesychian texts, except for Sinaiticus, the Koine texts, Koridethi, and most of the old Latin manuscripts have the longer reading. The shorter reading has comparatively little support. Weiss accepts the longer reading as the correct one. Tischendorf, however, takes the shorter reading following Sinaiticus and some of the Vulgate readings. Origen also uses this shorter reading.⁹

Considerable confusion has resulted from this uncertain transmission of the text. Hoskyns, for instance, quotes the views and interpretations of Lagrange, Bernard, and Holtzmann,

⁹Eberhard Nestle, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, revised by Erwin Nestle (Stuttgart: Privilegierte Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 19th edition, 1949), p. 274.

all of whom prefer the longer reading, while Hoskyns himself feels inclined toward the shorter reading.¹⁰ Bultmann insists that the shorter reading is the correct one simply because those who prefer the longer reading do not agree in their interpretations.¹¹ Campenhausen argues that the very fact that it is difficult to find an adequate interpretation makes it all the more reasonable that the longer reading was the original since an insertion would have been added only to make the passage more clear.¹²

N. M. Haring has made this text the subject of considerable study, and comes to the conclusion on the basis of evidence from many Latin writers that the shorter reading is the original. Haring shows how the insertion became established through certain preconceived notions regarding the meaning of the text. Since the Latin scholars worked primarily with the Vulgate, they did not see the distinction that the Greek makes between the two kinds of washings that are referred to in this passage (the Vulgate uses lavo in

¹⁰Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, The Fourth Gospel, edited by Francis Noel Davey (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), p. 439.

¹¹Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Evangelium des Johannes," Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament, Founded by Heinrich A. W. Meyer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952), XII, Part 2, 351.

¹²H. von Campenhausen "Zur Auslegung von Joh. 13:6-12," Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche, XXX (1934), 261.

both instances). To make this distinction clear the limiting phrase, nisi pedes, was added, and thus they felt that a long explanation of the meaning was unnecessary. Concluding his argument, he states:

The fact that the insertion enjoys the support of some manuscripts may be explained by inadvertence, a common source of human error. An examination of the exegetical background of these "interpolations" will prove that the Latin authors must have resorted to those additions to elucidate and underline the sense of the passage as they conceived it.¹³

As proof of this contention he shows how the Latin Fathers inserted or left out the disputed phrase depending on what they were emphasizing. St. Jerome and St. Ambrose particularly quote the passage with or without this phrase, nisi pedes.¹⁴ However, this very fact also demonstrates why the Latin Fathers are often considered to be slightly unreliable.

Of interest to the Lutheran Church is the attitude that Martin Luther took over against this verse. While all the critical information that we have today was not available in Luther's day, he does not seem to be unduly concerned, and in his interpretation he simply includes the disputed phrase.¹⁵ A large number of commentators have followed his example, but the weightiest proof still remains with the

¹³Haring, op. cit., p. 357.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 359

¹⁵Martin Luther, Evangelien-Auslegung, edited by Eduard Ellwein (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954), Part 4, pp. 368, 71, 72.

evidence from the Greek text which, in the final analysis, leaves little doubt that εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας was part of the original text written by John.

The Interpretations Presented

The meaning of Jesus' words in connection with the washing of His disciples' feet cannot easily be passed over. The interpretations that scholars have arrived at generally fall into three main categories. There are those who believe that Jesus is here making a direct reference to Baptism; there are those who see only a lesson in humility; and there are those who see Jesus symbolically demonstrating His whole work of redemption. Some of the commentators offer various combinations of these three main ideas, and at least one offers a rather novel explanation of the foot washing scene.

Those who understand Baptism as the chief point of contact will be dealt with first, mainly because the largest number of scholars have held this view, including Luther. In the early Western Church the first washing, λουόμενος, was referred to as Baptism, particularly by Augustine and Tertullian, who used this passage to prove that the apostles were baptized. They used the same passage to prove that re-baptism was unnecessary against the Donatists who held that in certain instances it was necessary.¹⁶ Even the Donatist

¹⁶Haring, op. cit., pp. 359, 372.

Petilianus of Cirta, while laying stress on another part of the verse, accepts the idea of Baptism in these words, though he denies that it is a valid argument against re-baptism of those who have lapsed. He claims that all are not clean when they are traitors, and therefore they need to be baptized again.¹⁷ Campenhausen also objects to Tertullian's argument on the basis that it is untenable that Jesus is polemically opposing a second Baptism of sects,¹⁸ but he too refers the passage to Baptism.¹⁹

Catholic tradition has followed almost a straight line with only slight variations, always offering Baptism as the main subject of Jesus' words. Objecting to Lagrange's interpretation that the passage is only a lesson in humility, Haring comments on this tradition:

It is obvious that this interpretation is out of harmony with an immemorable Christian tradition. This tradition may have shifted stress on one or the other possible meanings of lotus, but carefully avoided open opposition to the possible association of John 13:10 with the sacrament of Baptism.²⁰

While Haring states that the general consensus of opinion is that Baptism is referred to by Jesus when he says, "you are washed," he offers two interpretations of mundus totus:

¹⁷Ibid., p. 362.

¹⁸Campenhausen, op. cit., p. 263.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 270.

²⁰Haring, op. cit., p. 377.

. . . one, clean all over through Baptism or some other means (Augustine, Bede, Bernard, Rupert) with restrictions that there are always venial sins for further need of forgiveness; two, clean all over through Baptism or otherwise with an injunction to do post-baptismal penance for venial sins as well as mortal sins (Cyprian, i.e. Ernard of Bonneval).²¹

Bultmann further divides the various men who hold a view that Baptism is the chief reference of Jesus in this passage. First of all are those who accept *λελουμένοις* as referring to a complete cleansing from sin, particularly by Baptism, and who then think of *νίψασθαι* in connection with the Lord's Supper as the means of forgiveness for the inevitable new sins that crop up within man. However Bultmann feels that such a reference would hardly be possible since this is the same meal at which the Lord's Supper was instituted. In the second group are those who feel that the first washing was the cleansing of the disciples through the word of Jesus (John 15:3) and by their general contact with Him, and this second washing, the foot washing, is the actual Baptism. Proponents of this idea are Campenhausen, A. Schweitzer, and P. Fiebig.²² Campenhausen states very clearly that this is "not a picture of Baptism, but Baptism itself." The conclusion that he draws is that this foot washing is one of the forms of Christian Baptism, the humblest form.²³ Thus he

²¹Ibid., p. 372.

²²Bultmann, op. cit., p. 357.

²³Campenhausen, op. cit., p. 271.

translates the passage: "the one that is being bathed by me (der jetzt von mir Gebadete . . .) needs only to have his feet washed."²⁴ He further holds that this proves conclusively that immersion is not necessary, for the washing of feet is equal to the whole bath.²⁵

A large portion of the non-Catholic writers accept the traditional Western interpretation.²⁶ Even Luther takes this view:

Die Waschung ist die Taufe; sie macht uns rein. Doch behält das Fleisch immer noch in gewisser Weise über uns seine Herrschaft. Darum ist's not, dass die Predigt beharrlich darauf dringt, dass man die Füße wäscht, das heißt, dass die Sünden weniger werden und der Glaube zunehme. Darum ist auf die Füße hingewiesen, das heißt: das (geistliche) Leben nimmt zwar zu, und doch treten die Füße zuweilen in dem Dreck und müssen immer wieder gewaschen werden, sooft sie unrein sind.²⁷

Luther understands this passage to be a further emphasis of his answer to the question in the Small Catechism: "What does such baptizing with water signify?" He gives the answer:

It signifies that the Old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.²⁸

²⁴Ibid., p. 270.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Haring, op. cit., pp. 374 f.

²⁷Luther, op. cit., p. 368.

²⁸Martin Luther, Small Catechism (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943), p. 17.

Oepke,²⁹ Hauck,³⁰ Zahn,³¹ and Knox³² explain Christ's washing of the disciples' feet much like Luther. Zahn, particularly, presents a good comparison to the act of Jesus as he describes the bath of the morning followed by the dust and dirt accumulated as the day progresses. When evening comes the feet are quite dirty, and in need of cleansing, though a full bath is hardly necessary. Zahn compares *λελουμένους* to Baptism and describes the foot washing of Jesus as a further reminder to the regenerated Christian of the necessity for a constant renewal of his baptismal covenant.

In another sermon Luther speaks of a cleansing and a washing in connection with these words of Jesus, but he does not refer specifically to the washing of Baptism, but rather to a general cleansing by faith in Jesus Christ. To substantiate this point he quotes Acts 15:9, "God cleansed their hearts by faith." To Peter, therefore, Jesus as much as says, "You are washed," for as Luther explains it, "Wenn einer anhebt zu glauben, so ist er gewaschen."³³ As further

²⁹Oepke, op. cit., pp. 307 f.

³⁰Hauck, op. cit., p. 946.

³¹Theodor Zahn, "Das Evangelium des Johannes," Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1908), p. 530.

³²Wilfred L. Knox, "John 13: 1-30," Harvard Theological Review (April 1950), p. 162.

³³Luther, Evangelien-Auslegung, op. cit., p. 371.

proof of the fact that it is faith that cleanses he points to Jesus' words, "You are clean, but not all." The one who was unclean, was unclean because he refused to believe in Christ.

The second interpretation is that Jesus is here giving His disciples a demonstration in true humility. Since Jesus Himself explained His action as a demonstration of humility, the commentators generally agree that this meaning is in the text. However, not many are satisfied with that simple explanation. They refer the words of Jesus to Baptism, as we have seen, or they speak of the symbolic significance of this act. But, at least one ancient authority, St. Cyril of Alexandria, is willing to learn true humility from what Jesus did for His disciples. According to him, Jesus says to Peter, "You must learn my humility."³⁴ Hauck also ascribes an ethical interpretation to the foot washing when he explains that Jesus, by this lowly service, shows His willingness to be humble and thus gives an example for His disciples to follow.³⁵ Hoskyns points out that Chrysostom, Tillmann, and Lagrange hold only the view that the lesson Jesus is placing before His disciples is a lesson of true humility, a directive which would, in the days to come, guide them into loving service toward each other.³⁶ Knox speaks of a lesson

³⁴Haring, op. cit., p. 377.

³⁵Hauck, op. cit., p. 946.

³⁶Hoskyns, op. cit., p. 436.

in humility, but his emphasis is on the willingness of Jesus to share His position of rank. Referring to the dispute recorded in Luke (22:24 ff.), where Jesus promises the disciples twelve thrones from which they would judge the tribes of Israel, he explains, "The meaning of both sayings is that the disciples are in some sense equal to Jesus Himself."³⁷ Accordingly this action would serve more to elevate the disciples than to humble them, and they have actually learned no true humility.

Humility is indeed the immediate lesson that Jesus has in mind, yet this passage includes more than a demonstration in Christian living; it includes a picture of the whole life and death of Christ. This then is the third major interpretation that appears in connection with the account of the foot washing. Even Bruce, who concentrates upon Jesus' training program for the twelve disciples, sees more than a lesson for them in Christian etiquette: the foot washing must be "regarded as representing all of Christ's teaching and work."³⁸ Hoskyns expresses himself similarly and points out that the nature of this action is symbolical of the whole humiliation of Christ unto death. He states that "the washing of the disciples' feet rests upon and interprets the death of the Lord, and it is not a detached action containing in itself merely an ethical lesson."³⁹

³⁷Knox, op. cit., p. 161.

³⁸Bruce, op. cit., p. 345.

The interpretation that Hoskyns presents is demonstrated from the text and background of the scene itself. More than other commentators he bases the proof for his argument on the whole action of Jesus. The very first thing that Jesus did was to lay aside His garment as He prepared to wash the disciples' feet, and afterward He took it up again. This is significant to Hoskyns. Not just that He clothes Himself as a servant, He does that too, but the verb that John uses to describe this laying aside of His garment was used several times in preceding chapters where Jesus speaks of "laying down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11). A few verses later Jesus adds, "Therefore doth My Father love Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again (10:17 f.)." Then Jesus girded Himself with a towel, the mark of a slave, and began to wash their feet. Hoskyns says,

He humiliates Himself to wash the feet of the disciples, and thus symbolically declares their complete purification through the humiliation of the death of the Messiah.⁴⁰

Thus he closely links this washing of Jesus to His death for His disciples. The humiliation of Jesus is not merely to show His disciples how to be humble, but it is to show them that God must humble Himself for their salvation.

In this connection Peter's obstinacy only emphasizes

³⁹Hoskyns, op. cit., p. 437.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 439.

the importance of Christ's task. Hoskyns comments on Peter's question, "Dost thou wash my feet?" when he says,

The contrast is not between the humiliation of Jesus and the pride of Peter, for there is no pride in Peter's words. The contrast is between the knowledge of Jesus, which is the grounds for His action, and the ignorance of Peter, who does not as yet perceive that the humiliation of the Messiah is the effective cause of Christian salvation.⁴¹

Bruce adds that if the principle on which Peter's opposition to the washing of the disciples' feet were consistently carried out, the whole work and teaching of Christ would have come to naught. Peter's refusal to be washed in the manner that Christ proposes is an objection to Christ's humility. Actually he does not want Christ, the Son of God, to have any part with man because that, too, is beneath His dignity. As a result we can have no part with Christ because the gulf is impassable for us. We cannot receive any benefits from Him, our feet cannot be washed, but even worse, our souls cannot be cleansed. Christ, the Son of God, had to become man, He had to humble Himself. The foot washing is one more demonstration of the necessity of divine humiliation for man. But even worse, Peter not only refused to let Christ humble Himself, he even refused Him the right to be the Lord. Peter challenged Christ's judgment. Peter wanted to give the orders. Thus Peter was inconsistent in his very objection to the Lord's humiliation in not allowing

⁴¹Ibid., p. 439.

Him to humble Himself, and at the same time refusing to let Him exercise His Lordship.⁴² The lesson that Jesus gave to Peter and the other disciples is truly a lesson in the humility that is Christ-like, but at the same time He gave to them an indication of what His humility really implies, a lesson which they could learn fully only through the gift of God's Holy Spirit.

One additional interpretation was presented by R. Eisler, namely, that the foot washing portrays the mystical union with Jesus, because it is a nuptial rite. Though Bultmann labels this interpretation a curiosity, it must be admitted that Gentile literature attests to such a custom⁴³ and it also appears among the Jews, although at a later date. The foot washing would then bring Jesus, the heavenly bridegroom, unto His mystical bride, the Church. But no trace of a mystical bride is found in John.⁴⁴

The significance, then, of the foot washing account might be summed up in a paraphrase of the recorded events and conversation. The all-knowing, all-powerful Son of God, who loved His disciples and all the world as well, faces the bitter, cruel death of the cross, burdened with the sin and guilt of all men. Gathered together with the disciples in

⁴²Bruce, op. cit., pp. 345 ff.

⁴³Supra, p. 6.

⁴⁴Rudolf Bultmann, op. cit., p. 358.

an upper room to celebrate a last feast together with them, He demonstrates His true humility as an example of the love and humility they should have and show toward one another. He also demonstrates that He, while the Lord and Master, takes upon Himself the form of a servant, a servant who willingly serves those whom He loves. Shedding His garment, even as He predicted that He would lay down His life, He dons the garment of a slave, takes up a slave's task, and, pouring water into a basin, He begins to wash the disciples' feet.

All of the disciples were probably greatly astounded. Their Lord and Master, Whom God had called His Son at the Jordan River and on the mount of transfiguration, Who had performed great miracles of healing, Who had raised Lazarus from the dead, this man, God Himself, was washing the disciples' feet. Peter, the most outspoken of the twelve, completely overwhelmed by Christ's action, vociferously objects, "You, Lord, Master, wash my feet?" Patiently the Lord replies, "What I do, you don't understand, that's why you object, but you shall understand. Later I'll explain this lesson in humility, and after my death and resurrection the Holy Spirit will help you to see the whole plan of salvation demonstrated by this act of servitude." But Peter shows a stubborn streak and refuses to be satisfied with Christ's explanation. (At an earlier occasion, when he had acted similarly, Jesus used even stronger language to the

same Peter, "Get thee behind me Satan" Matt. 16:23.)

"Lord," Peter says, "You will never wash my feet!" Jesus' answer is necessarily a firm one: "If I can't wash you, if I can't cleanse you from sin, if I can't humble Myself to suffer and die for you, you will have no place with Me, you can't share with Me the Kingdom, you and I will be eternally parted."

Peter is immediately subdued. He realizes that His refusal is an act of rebellion against his Lord. Lest he should be separated from Him, and in order to be especially assured, he says, "Lord, not my feet only, but my head and my hands too." Jesus returns, "You foolish Peter, to think that I am referring to such an outward cleansing, for you who have been thoroughly cleansed by the washing of the water and the word, by my daily contact with you, you are indeed clean and need no further washing, but only this washing of your feet which is a lesson to you of humility and another demonstration of the true work of the Messiah. While you have been washed by the means just mentioned, the cleansing process is accomplished only by the acceptance of Christ, the humiliated Savior. You are indeed completely clean because you believe in Me, you trust in Me. But not all of you are clean because not all of you have accepted Me. One of you has not turned his life over to Me, therefore he is not cleansed."

Jesus Did Not Ordain Foot Washing as a Perpetual Ordinance

The Lutheran Church, among others, does not believe that Jesus in the Upper Room ordained a perpetual ordinance. This position is maintained by a number of church groups that hold a literal interpretation of this action of Jesus. The answer to their charge of disobedience on our part to a plain command of Christ has already been given to some extent in the preceding pages, but it is now the intention to point out several specific arguments.

Verses fourteen and fifteen contain the words: "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet. (15) For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you." The key word is ὑπόδειγμα, an example. Jesus very clearly states that what He has done was done for an example. The very nature of an example is that the act itself does not necessarily have to be repeated, but rather the ethical idea that it represents must be continued. Thayer lists also this definition for ὑπόδειγμα: ". . . a sign suggestive of anything . . . a representation . . ." ⁴⁵ Here also can be added the comment of the Funk & Wagnalls

⁴⁵ Joseph H. Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: American Book Company, 1889), p. 642.

unabridged dictionary: "Example comes closer to the possible freedom of the model rather than the exactness of the pattern; often we can not, in a given case, exactly imitate the best example."⁴⁶ Plainly the word itself does not require an exact duplication of all that Christ did, under exactly the same circumstances. If that were the requirement, it would almost mean that men today would have to go about wearing sandals, that meals would have to be taken in a reclining position, in fact one would have to be Christ Himself before an exact duplication could be possible.

Also one might ask what is the act of which Jesus gives an example? Is it an example of foot washing? Certainly not, for all the disciples knew how to wash feet. Obviously the example that Jesus gives is an example of true humility; humility is what the disciples needed to learn. We indeed, also, need a command to follow His example, but it becomes a gross perversion of Christ's directive when men perform the outward act and feel that thereby they have fulfilled His command. As Christ has given us an example of His love and willingness to serve in just such a lowly, common, daily task, we too must take the

⁴⁶"Example," New Standard Dictionary of the English Language, edited by Isaac K. Funk (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1921), p. 868.

opportunities of daily living to love, help, and serve and thus fulfill His command among our fellow men. This point is expanded by Meyer to include a specific Christian function in our service toward our neighbors:

It is not the act itself, but its moral essence which, after His example, He enjoins upon them the disciples to exercise. This moral essence, however, consists not in lowly and ministering love generally [sic], in which Jesus, by washing the feet of His disciples, desired to give them an example, but, as verse ten proves, in the ministering love which, in all self-denial and humility, is active for moral purification and cleansing of others. As Jesus had just set forth this ministering love by His own example, when He, although their Lord and Master, performed on the persons of His disciples the servile duty of washing their feet,--as an emblem, however, of the efficacy of His love to purify them spiritually,--so ought they to wash one another's feet; i.e. with the same self-denying love to be reciprocally serviceable to one another with a view to moral purification.⁴⁷

Furthermore, there is a difference between the command of Jesus in this thirteenth chapter of John and the command of Jesus as recorded by Paul (1 Cor. 11:25) in connection with the Lord's Supper. In John Jesus says, "καθὼς ἐγὼ ἔποιησα ὑμῶν καὶ ὑμεῖς ποιεῖτε." "As I have done" are the important words. Christians do "as" He has commanded when they follow His example of humility. But in the institution of the Lord's Supper the emphatic definite pronoun is used. "τοῦτο ποιεῖτε," Jesus says, this which I have done you should do.

⁴⁷Heinrich Wilhelm August Meyer, Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John, translated from the fifth edition of the German by William Urwick, the translation revised and edited by Frederick Crombie (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, Publishers, 1884), p. 393.

There is no "as" involved here, but a clear simple statement is given that allows no other interpretation. Thus it does not follow that if we do not accept a literal interpretation of foot washing, we should not carry out literally the Lord's Supper. The two are not on the same level. The blessings promised in verse seventeen of this chapter are not promised to those who wash feet, but rather to those who are humble as Jesus was humble, whereas the Lord's Supper is actually the means whereby the blessings of forgiveness and salvation become ours.

Basic to the whole problem is the approach of the Lutheran Church to Scripture over against the approach of fundamentalist church groups. Because of our interest in a Christocentric approach to Scripture we are not interested "in an atomistic, proof text, concordance approach to the Scripture."⁴⁸ The purpose of the entire Scripture is to lead men to believe that in Christ Jesus through faith we have a gracious God. We are not redeemed by obedience to the letter of the law, but we are saved because of the work of Christ for us.⁴⁹ The churches that hold rigidly to foot washing and legalistically observe other practices as well (tithing, strict Sabbath observance, and abstinence from

⁴⁸F. E. Mayer, "The Formal and Material Principles of Lutheran Confessional Theology," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXIV (August, 1953), p. 547.

⁴⁹Ibid.

drink, cigarettes, et ad infinitum), place the observance of these customs ahead of Christ Himself. While foot washing can be a fine impressive ceremony, when its observance is made a matter of conscience "Christ is become of no effect" (Gal. 5:4). The letter of Paul to the Galatians is a clear and certain testimony against all legalism. That this is the correct way to view the foot washing of Jesus is demonstrated by the attitude of the Church towards it as history shows us. This will be the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV

FOOT WASHING IN HISTORY

Foot Washing in the Apostolic Church

If Jesus had intended His disciples and all Christians to continue His act of washing their feet, there certainly would have been some reference made in the apostolic writings in this connection. Therefore it is most significant that no mention is made that they tried to carry out this custom as a church ceremony. The Lord's Supper was a common practice (1 Cor. 10 and 11), but foot washing obviously was not. In fact there is only one other reference to foot washing (1 Tim. 5:10) and that is not linked up with any ceremony, but rather it is a further indication that Jesus' example was one of loving service. In this passage foot washing is merely referred to as one item on a list that includes bringing up children, lodging strangers, aiding the afflicted. Foot washing is included in the middle of this list as belonging to the general category of good works.

The noticeable absence of the foot washing custom in the apostolic writings is a clear commentary on how the action of Jesus was understood by His disciples. This is by far the strongest proof that the foot washing was indeed an example, and the ethical lesson of that example was

carried out in many ways by the Early Church. They felt the obligation to love and to serve, but they did not bind themselves to a rigid observance of only one form of service, such as foot washing.

The Development of Foot Washing in the Catholic Church

There is evidence that in the post-apostolic age, the Church provided for the washing of feet. According to Knight:

Churches of the early Christian Centuries were provided with an atrium or area or "court," surrounded with porticoes or cloisters, in the middle of which stood a fountain called a cantharus or phiale. In this it was deemed necessary that worshipers should wash their feet and hands before entering the church.¹

However, this in no way compares to the action of Jesus in the upper room, but rather it is a natural provision because of the local situation which no doubt was similar to the conditions described in Chapter II.

The first record that foot washing was a custom of any kind comes from the early fourth century where there is evidence that there was a foot washing in connection with Baptism. For instance, the Council of Elvira (300 A.D.), Canon XLVIII, directs that the feet of those to be baptized are not to be washed by priests, but presumably by clerics

¹G. A. Frank Knight, "Feet Washing," Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, edited by James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), V, 816.

or lay people.² Hoskyns, however, feels that this is the abolition of all foot washing in connection with the baptismal ceremony.³ In any case the evidence is widely scattered and inconclusive. Various missals included a ceremony for the washing of the feet at a very early date. Traces are found that the Churches in Gaul and Ireland were among the first to follow this custom.⁴ Knight presents a detailed account of the history of foot washing with Baptism and concludes:

No traces of the practice can be discerned in the East; and as it was never followed at Rome, it is plain that the foot washing of baptized persons was purely a local peculiarity, introduced at an early date into some parts of the Catholic Church, but never universal. At the present day no trace of the rite can be found anywhere in connection with the sacrament of Baptism.⁵

The Council of Toledo in 694 was the first to give official recognition to a liturgical foot washing. The Council obliged the priests of Spain and Gaul to practice this custom. Gradually in Gaul and in other parts of Europe the custom became more and more common. It was

²Herbert Thurston, "Washing of Feet and Hands," The Catholic Encyclopedia, edited by Charles G. Herbermann, et al. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), XV, 557.

³Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, The Fourth Gospel, edited by Francis Noel Davey (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), p. 444.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Knight, loc. cit.

practiced most frequently in monasteries, by the inmates upon their fellows. Also any guests that sought refuge in the monasteries often received this service. As a liturgical service it was sometimes performed on Sundays in some areas, but more generally it was observed on Maundy Thursday. The peculiar customs and procedures that were followed in various areas in connection with this rite, both in the Church and in the royal palaces, are dealt with more fully by Knight.⁶

In Rome the ceremony of the Pedilavium is begun with the singing of "Mandatum novum do vobis," from which the name Mandatum stems. During the ceremony the Pope sprinkles a few drops of water on the right foot of twelve old men, which he then wipes and kisses.⁷

In the Eastern Church the custom of foot washing goes back to the fifth century and is very rigidly observed. Hoskyns presents an interesting description of the traditional Greek ceremony:

The Archbishop, Bishop, or Chief Priest, gorgeously vested, enters the church through the great gates of the sanctuary, accompanied by twelve priests and the reader of the Gospel (the Evangelist). One of the priests takes the part of a doorkeeper to represent Judas, another of a steward to represent Saint Peter.

⁶Ibid., pp. 816 ff.

⁷"Foot-washing," Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, edited by John M^cClintock and James Strong (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1894), III, 615.

When the choir has sung the introit and appropriate collects have been read, the celebrant, who represents the Christ, removes his vestments and, girding himself with a towel, pours water into a basin and advances to Judas, who rudely pushes forward his feet to be washed and kissed, thereby indicating his hardness of heart. When the feet of the other disciples have been washed, the celebrant comes last to Simon Peter, who with tears withdraws his feet and shows with his hand, his expression, and his whole body, his reluctance to be thus washed. The dialogue in John thirteen is recited, ending with the washing of Peter's feet. At the words Now ye are clean, but not all, the celebrant turns to Judas and points his finger at him. The celebrant then returns to his throne, removes the towel, and is vested.⁸

The conclusion, therefore, that can be drawn is that the foot washing was a custom sporadically carried out from the early fourth century, first, in connection with Baptism, and later separated into a liturgical service of its own and as a sign of hospitality to the guests in the monasteries. In the Greek Church foot washing came to be considered even a sacrament. And in the Roman Church foot washing gained its greatest popularity through Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), who strongly recommended it as a "sacramentum remissionis peccatorum quotidianorum."⁹ Yet, significantly, foot washing did not become a general public practice in either Church.

⁸Hoskyns, op. cit., pp. 445 f.

⁹M'Clintock and Strong, loc. cit.

Foot Washing among the Protestants

The Lutheran Church from the beginning has taken a rather negative position toward the practice of foot washing. No doubt Luther's opposition to this custom stems from the abuses which he had seen in the Roman Church. In no uncertain terms Luther describes the papal foot washing ceremony:

Es ist eine Nachäffung. Um deswillen blähen sie sich noch mehr auf, weil sie meinen sie hätten das Wort Gottes. . . . Die Mönche üben diesen Brauch nur zum Schein gegen ihre Brüder.¹⁰

Knight characterizes the attitude of the Lutheran Church toward foot washing in the following three statements:

To him [Luther] the ceremony was one in which the superior washes the inferior, who, the ceremony over, will have to act all the more humbly towards him, while Christ made it an emblem of true humility and abnegation, and raised thereby the position of those whose feet he washed. "We have nothing to do," said he, "with foot washing with water; otherwise it is not only the feet of the twelve, but those of everybody, we should wash. People would be much more benefited if a general bath were at once ordered, and the whole body washed. If you wish to wash your neighbor's feet, see that your heart is really humble, and help every one in becoming better."

Knight quotes the Lutheran theologian, Bengel, in the following statement:

In our day, popes and princes imitate the foot washing to the letter; but a greater subject for admiration

¹⁰Martin Luther, Evangelien-Auslegung, edited by Eduard Allwein (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954), Part 4, p. 361.

would be, for instance, a pope, in unaffected humility, washing the feet of one king, than the feet of twelve paupers.

That this was taken seriously by the Lutherans is proved by the following statement:

In 1718 the Lutheran Upper Consistory of Dresden condemned twelve Lutheran citizens of Weida to public penance for having permitted Duke Moritz Wilhelm to wash their feet.¹¹

Needless to say, such severe treatment would hardly be meted out by the Lutheran Church today, but foot washing has gained little more favor as a necessary custom since the days of Luther.

Since the days of the Reformation, however, there have been other churches that have followed the custom of foot washing just as energetically as Luther opposed it. Most important for our consideration are the Mennonites and the groups related to them. The Mennonites date back to Menno Simon who organized the dispersed Anabaptist groups into simple brotherly associations about 1536. One of their practices was the washing of feet as found in John 13.¹²

A number of confessions list the foot washing practice at a very early date, but of greatest significance is the Dortrecht Confession of Faith adopted in 1632 by fifty-two Flemish and Friesian ministers. In 1660 the congregations

¹¹Knight, op. cit., p. 821.

¹²Lars P. Qualben, A History of the Christian Church (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1942), pp. 332 f.

of Alsace, France, which included the Swiss Brethren of that area, adopted this Confession. This was the major attempt for unity among the various groups in Europe, and it is the Confession that is generally used by conservative Mennonites in America.¹³ The eleventh article of this Confession reads as follows:

Von Fußzwaschen der Heiligen

Wir bekennen auch ein Fußzwaschen der Heiligen, wie solches der Herr Christus selbst nicht allein hat eingesetzt und befohlen, sonder hat auch selbst seinen Aposteln (obwohl er ihr Herr und Meister war) die Füße gewaschen, und damit ein Beispiel gegeben, dasz sie gleichfalls einander auch sollten die Füße waschen, und also thun, wie er ihnen gethan hat, welches sie auch folglich ferner die Gläubigen zu unterhalten gelehret haben; und das Alles zum Zeichen der wahren Erniedrigung, wie auch hauptsächlich, um bei diesem Fußzwaschen an das rechte Waschen zu denken, damit wir durch sein theures Blut gewaschen und der Seele nach gereinigt sind.¹⁴

The custom of foot washing, consequently, became a self-evident practice among these groups, even though there were divisions for other less important reasons. The first division of the Swiss Brethren (Mennonites of Switzerland and South Germany) resulted from a controversy in which Jacob Ammann (Amon) was a key figure. There were several points at issue, Ammann holding for stricter discipline and adherence to various ordinances. The group that followed him came to be known as the Amish. Of importance for us,

¹³John Horsch, Mennonites in Europe (Scottsdale, Penn.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1942), p. 247.

¹⁴Daniel K. Cassel, Geshichte der Mennoniten (Philadelphia: J. Kohler, 1890), p. 22.

however, is that foot washing was not an issue and was continued to be practiced by both groups.¹⁵

The Mennonites base their doctrine of the foot washing on Paul's reference to it in 1 Timothy (5:10) in addition to this passage in John. They also mention Tertullian (A.D. 160-220) as one who had said that it was an observance of the Church. They call attention to the practices and customs that existed in the Roman Church from the fourth century on. They even state that Luther spoke of it favorably in his Large Catechism.¹⁶

While they hold that foot washing is a very important custom, it must be admitted that their approach to the problem is quite sober, judging from the interpretation of the words of Jesus in verses fourteen and fifteen advanced by the official Mennonite Sunday school teachers' manual, the Herald Teacher:

Verse 14. Jesus now states His impelling conclusion: If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet: ye also ought to wash one another's feet. Some spiritualize this to interpret that Jesus commands His disciples to do humble, loving service rather than to try to outdo one another by seeking for the better places. However, there have been some throughout the ages who have practiced this command literally. The church needs a practice such as this to keep Christ's command of humble service and brotherhood before her in a forceful way. See 1 Tim. 5:10. Verse 15. Jesus added, For I have given you an example, that ye should

¹⁵Horsch, op. cit., pp. 262 ff.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 357 f.

do as I have done to you. Jesus was interested primarily in the inner attitudes of the disciples one toward another. His purpose was to give them a spirit of humility and love which would be expressed in mutual service rather than in rivalry. But to perpetuate a truth means that it must be taught. The washing of feet is a fitting symbol to perpetuate such a truth.¹⁷

The custom of foot washing is also practiced among various other groups with slightly varying customs in some instances. Some of the more prominent ones are the Tunkers, or Dunkards, the Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of God, the Amana Society and a large number of Baptist sects and other splinter groups. The Moravian Brethren revived the custom for a time but they abolished the practice in 1818.¹⁸

In concluding this historical survey, let us say that Christians everywhere, whether they follow the practice of foot washing or not, are bound by the love of Christ to love one another and willingly serve their brethren even as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it in complete obedience to His Father's will and because of His loving humility toward all men. The Lord gave His disciples a striking lesson of this in the washing of their feet, and certainly it is not for us to censure those who use the same example to teach the same lesson, provided that they

¹⁷"Lesson XII," Herald Teacher, edited by Paul H. Lederbach, IV (March, 1954), 50.

¹⁸Knight, loc. cit.

do not make it binding upon the conscience of Christians as an obligatory rule. By the same token it is not in place for others to censure the Lutheran Church for failing to carry out in a literal fashion one of His commands while demonstrating to the whole world that the ethical lesson that Jesus taught has been learned by them.

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