

## SHOULD FOOT-WASHING BE AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF COMMUNION LITURGIES?

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How essential is foot-washing to the celebration of the Eucharist? Seventh-day Adventists insist upon the celebration of the rite before communion as “Christ’s appointed preparation for the sacramental service.”<sup>1</sup> They further consider its ritual observance “a moral obligation” binding upon all Christians.<sup>2</sup>

This opinion assumes that the *mandatum* (i.e., the command of Christ in Jn 13:14-15 to “wash one another's feet”) constitutes a (1) liturgical ordinance (rather than a practical command) that is (2) necessarily (though perhaps not exclusively) attached to the Eucharistic celebration. However, Christ's action appears to be practical, providing an “example” of Christian humility (13:15; cf. 1 Tim 5:10) through a particular, but hardly exclusive, gesture. It also seems broader in usage than a preparation for the Communion meal. Foot washing was a regularly-need service in ancient times,<sup>3</sup> and indeed, typifies a continual experience of humble service in the gospel story.

Perhaps in light of these facts, “the practice of foot washing has never gained prominence in Christianity,” as Adventist theologian Herbert Kiesler admits.<sup>1</sup> Just as telling is his admission, “the biblical record gives no additional account of foot washing.”<sup>1</sup> This seems hardly congruent with the claim that apostolic communities understood the ritual observance of foot-washing to be a “moral obligation.”

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1. White, Ellen G., *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1960), 650.

2. Kiesler, Herbert, “The Ordinances: Baptism, Foot Washing, and Lord’s Supper,” *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 594.

3. Of note, rituals commonly perpetuate actions that have lost their practical significance. It seems unlikely, then, that foot washing served a ritual purpose in a time when it was viewed in a primarily practical sense (as in the primitive stages of Christian history).

Nevertheless, Catholics agree with Adventists that one may imitate Christ's gesture liturgically, though they would not consider the rite indispensable to the celebration of the Eucharist. As noted earlier, early Christians never considered the rite of foot-washing to be an essential component of the Eucharistic liturgy, though they responded to the *mandatum* in a variety of practical and liturgical contexts (e.g., as part of baptism, festal, and private rites).<sup>4</sup> The extant Eucharistic liturgies of the early Church do not support the Adventist concept that Communion is, intrinsically, a “double-ordinance” (including both foot-washing and the Eucharistic celebration). Attempts to justify this concept by an appeal to the order of the Lord's Supper narratives (especially Jn 13) fail to recognize the fact that the essential outline of the Christian Eucharistic liturgy (1) was formulated before, and independently of, scripture, and (2) was never grounded on the strict sequence of events on the night of the Last Supper.

In the first place, the Bible addresses existing Christian communities, which had been celebrating the rite “for twenty years before the first of the New Testament documents had been written.”<sup>5</sup> None of the New Testament documents so much as mention “the actual way in which it is performed, which [they] everywhere take for granted.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, New Testament data itself presupposes the earlier propagation of a received pattern of celebrating the Eucharist that was transmitted by oral transmission. No biblical text preserves these basic instructions; Paul, for instance, merely corrects isolated abuses of an established (but unspecified) form of celebration (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-34).<sup>7</sup>

. . . it is important for the understanding of the whole future history of the liturgy to grasp the fact that Eucharistic worship from the outset was not based on Scripture. . . . The authority for its celebration was the historical tradition that it had been instituted by Jesus, cited incidentally by St Paul in 1 Cor 11 and attested in the second Christian generation by the written gospels. The method of celebrating it, the primitive outline of the liturgy, was from the first prescribed, not by an authoritative code, but by the tradition of custom alone.

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4. Thurston, Herbert, “Washing of Feet and Hands,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*, volume XV (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1913) 557-558.

5. Dix, Dom Gregory, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1960), 3.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Of course, Paul never mentions foot washing in association to the communion rite either.

When the New Testament describes the original celebration of this sacrament (in the upper room), its structure differs from the essential order attested in the earliest extant liturgies. In particular, McGuckian notes: “the seven-action scheme of the Last Supper became the four-action scheme of the Eucharist.”<sup>8</sup> These schemes, earlier proposed by Dix<sup>9</sup>, are outlined below:

Last Supper	Liturgy:
1. “took bread”	1. Offertory - “took” bread <i>and</i> cup
2. “gave thanks”	2. Prayer/benediction - “gave thanks”
3. “broke it”	3. Fraction - “broke” bread
4. “gave it to his disciples”	4. Communion – “gave it” (distribution)
5. “took cup”	
6. “gave thanks”	
7. “gave it to His disciples”	

Dix notes that “with absolute unanimity the liturgical tradition reproduces these seven actions as four”; they constitute “the absolutely invariable nucleus of every eucharistic rite known to us throughout antiquity from the Euphrates to Gaul.”<sup>10</sup> Since “the outline—the Shape—of the Liturgy is everywhere most remarkably the same, after 300 years of independent existence in the widely scattered churches” “there is good reason to think that this outline. . . is of genuinely apostolic origin.”<sup>11</sup>

If one were to reckon foot-washing as yet an eighth step to the “Last Supper” scheme (that is, the first of the eight), the point is made more applicable to our present discussion. The essential Eucharistic liturgy is a simplified imitation of the events of the Last Supper, established by an oral, apostolic tradition. Therefore, it is unnecessary that this essential form imitate those events any more exhaustively (e.g., by including a “foot-washing” action). Accordingly, no early liturgy prescribes a rite of foot-washing.

Ultimately then, what is at stake is not the obligation of the *mandatum*, as some Adventists believe. Catholics have followed Christ's command

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8. McGuckian, Michael, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass: A Search for an Acceptable Notion of Sacrifice* (Hillenbrand, 2005), 43.

9. Dix, 48-49.

10. Dix, 48.

11. Dix, 5.

in both practical and ritual ways. Rather, disagreement arises when some Adventists insist that foot-washing is essential to the celebration of Communion. Catholics would instead heed the words of Paul, and “hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter” (2 Thess 2:15) by defending the whole integrity of the “primitive outline of the liturgy” transmitted from apostolic times. In this light, the entire question of foot-washing aptly illustrates Catholicism’s balanced consideration of scripture and oral tradition: cautioning the reader against unrestrained applications of the former.

Additionally, an exploration of Catholic forms of ritual foot-washing might help Adventists gain a greater appreciation of the sincerity of the Catholic tradition. Rather than color our divergent ways of fulfilling the *mandatum* a point of disagreement, Adventists might find our shared liturgical interest in Jn 13:14-15 a nexus of convergence. One could dream of a day in which a pope would wash the feet of a General Conference president.