

CHURCH *of* GOD

A WORLDWIDE ASSOCIATION, INC.

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Dear Brethren,

As we approach another Passover, my question for all of us is how much thought have we given to the symbols that we will partake of on that night? Specifically, my question is whether we have given much thought to the foot-washing ceremony and what it means. For many professing Christians today, assuming they have even heard of it, foot washing is a rather arcane, old-fashioned activity that is no longer taken seriously. But for us, it is a very serious matter, in fact, a matter of life or death.

On the night that Christ instituted the symbols of the bread and the wine, He also instructed His disciples to wash the feet of their fellow disciples. In doing so, Christ made a direct connection to the importance of being a servant and eliminating a weakness that can derail any Christian life—human pride.

Of the four Gospels, only John makes reference to the foot-washing ceremony. Even without any references in Matthew, Mark and Luke, in John alone there are more verses devoted to foot washing than the cumulative total of those devoted to the bread and the wine. No one doubts for a moment the importance of the bread and the wine. But what about the foot washing?

Luke records that on the night that Christ introduced the New Covenant Passover, there was a dispute among the disciples about, of all things, who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of God (Luke 22:24-30). Imagine that! On the night before Jesus Christ died as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins, the disciples were consumed with a debate about which one of them should be considered “the greatest”!

John records the foot-washing ceremony that occurred that same evening (John 13:1-17). It was during the meal and prior to the introduction of the bread and the wine that Jesus Christ arose and washed the feet of the disciples. There were two parts to this event—a personal conversation with the apostle Peter and a general conversation with all the apostles.

In the personal conversation, after Peter objected, Christ made it clear that if He did not wash Peter’s feet he would have no part with Him (John 13:8). What did that mean? The foot-washing ceremony was a symbol of humility, an exercise in being a servant first and foremost, rather than looking for a position of greatness. Through this ceremony, Christ showed the importance of humility in the salvation of mankind.

We read in Ezekiel 28:17 that pride (“your heart was lifted up”) led to Lucifer’s rebellion, which, in turn, led to destruction throughout the universe. The return of Jesus Christ to this earth will restore all things (Acts 3:21), and it begins with our repentance (verse 19). True repentance includes seeking forgiveness without deserving it and striving to change without any excuses. It begins with an admission of wrongdoing, which requires humility on our part!

Peter was to become an important leader in the New Testament Church, but on that Passover night he was still a carnal human being susceptible to pride and thinking too highly of himself. Christ insisted that Peter become a servant to achieve spiritual greatness. After discussing this with Peter, Christ addressed the apostles as a group and instructed that they do as He had—wash one another's feet (John 13:14-15). Why? How did this help anything? To have someone wash your feet (and to wash someone's feet) is a humbling experience. It's humbling for both individuals, but it is a different experience for each one. Having your feet washed reminds you of Jesus Christ's example on that Passover night, but washing someone's feet connects you to that person in a special way, as a servant.

At the time of Christ's last Passover, the foundation for the Church was soon to be established. Leadership was being defined very differently from the gentile model. Christ pointed out that the gentiles (and the Jews, for that matter) did not see themselves as humble servants who wash the feet of others (Luke 22:24-27). These timeless principles have not changed in almost 2,000 years. Still today, if we want to be great, we must first become servants.

Sometimes we make the same mistake that the world makes in identifying leaders: We look for the most gifted, the most self-assured person, when, in reality, the best-qualified individual is the one who serves to the point of being willing to wash the feet of his fellow disciples. Foot washing in the first century was relegated to the lowliest servant in the household. It was not a job that anyone would desire. This was the position that Christ chose to help us understand true Christianity. He also made it clear to the disciples that greatness in the Kingdom of God would be determined by one's service (Luke 22:26).

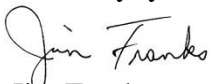
This year when we kneel down to wash the feet of a brother or sister, just as Christ instructed us, we should think of that person as a child of God, someone who is a future member of God's family in the Kingdom of God. By washing feet—in advance of taking the bread and the wine—we demonstrate our willingness to be a servant to the people of God.

Humility and servanthood are the key qualities that Christ taught His disciples on His final Passover evening. There is a clear connection between the foot-washing ceremony and the core Christian values that must underpin our lives—humility and servanthood.

In the past year we have lost three pastors unexpectedly to death—one in the U.S., one in Peru, and one in the Philippines, just three weeks ago. They are all deeply missed. With the approach of the Passover, I have thought a lot about these three men and the fine examples they were.

Like many of you, I have begun the pre-Passover self-examination process. As part of that process, I don't want to overlook the importance of what Christ did when He instituted the simple but meaningful ceremony of foot washing.

Sincerely, your brother in Christ,


Jim Franks