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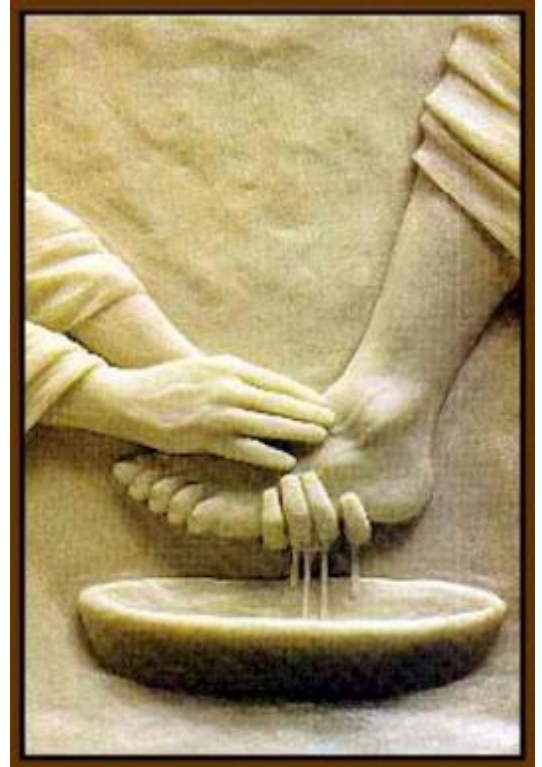
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## ON THE COVER:

August is Original Free Will Baptist Heritage Month!

# Why a Theology of Foot Washing is Necessary

By The Reverend Jonathan L. Best



This article was modified from a sermon given to Wintergreen OFWB Church on June 28, 2015.

Why foot washing?<sup>1</sup> This is what I have been asking myself for well over a year now. I have been perplexed as to the reason I should choose to study foot washing as part of my dissertation. Given the multitude of Christian practices, symbols, and rituals available to me to explore, why should this occupy my mind? More importantly, why has this short, seemingly obscure passage in John changed my theological perspective so much? I have not been able to construct a definite answer to these and many more questions. I also admit that for years I have ignored this practice. It was of very little interest to me and my theological perspective. I considered it an eccentric practice from my past. I did not consider foot washing as part of my theological perspective. However after extensive interviewing with pastors and members of our denomination regarding foot washing, I have come to a profound revelation...

I was wrong.

I came to a realization following months of theological wrestling about what this practice means. Studying the practice has led me to consider foot washing as extremely important for our Christian perspective and theology. Without foot washing we are missing the most important symbol of service that we have. Through foot washing I have discovered that Christianity must be weak. Foot washing helped me discover the value of weakness.

What do I mean by the value of weakness? That is an odd thing to say. What value can there be in weakness? Who wants to be weak? I'll admit that weakness is not a coveted quality. From an early age we are taught to stand up for ourselves, to fight for our rights, and be strong. Of course these are not necessarily bad qualities. In fact, these are often quite admirable, especially when it comes to the defense of those in need. Strength is both useful and even necessary at times. For example, we expect our firefighters and police officers to be both physically and mentally strong. We expect them to have the strength to handle the many life-threatening situations they have to face. Members of the armed forces are trained to be strong in order to handle the intensity of the battlefield. Strength is often a personal characteristic one needs to draw from in order to handle and perform extreme tasks. We could name several situations where weakness would neither be desirable or appropriate. Situations where it would be shunned, removed, and altogether removed. With all that we have to face both individually and collectively as a community and nation, who can afford to be weak?

Strength is neither inherently bad nor evil. In many and most instances it is good. Jesus had strength. He was without a doubt powerful. The stormy seas obeyed the power of His voice, which of course caused great fear among the disciples. No one but the Lord could have that kind of power. He had the power to heal

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1. This ordinance has many names. It is more formally known as washing of the saints' feet. Other names include: washing feet, washing of the feet, and feet washing. I have chosen to use the term "foot washing" because of its appearance in several major theological encyclopedias and for the sake of simplicity.

the sick and perform incredible, miraculous feats. Seemingly there was nothing that He couldn't do. His strength, His power was unmatched. Even Satan recognized the power of Christ. The temptation of Christ demonstrates that Satan was well aware of Christ's abilities. Yet there was something that Satan failed to realize. It was also something that His disciples and followers could not understand about Him. For Christ, it was never about His strength or His abilities. It was never about His apparent omnipotent power. What they could not understand was that Jesus demonstrated weakness. Jesus understood that one cannot know strength without knowing weakness. His ministry was not about the things He could do, but what He was willing to do for others. For example, in Mark's gospel we get the picture of a Jesus reluctant to you use His power. So much so that He would tell those He healed to not speak of it to others. It's almost as if He didn't want others to know what He could do. He didn't want to be known by His power. He wanted to be known by His service.

Jesus recognized how out of balance our world becomes when we begin to over-value power. He witnessed what happens when strength is associated only with power. He came face to face with the lepers and outcasts who were cast out the villages and cities. He encountered people who had lost everything, namely the beggars, the homeless, and the downtrodden barely scraping by. He spent time with the infirmed, the blind, and the lame. He encouraged the little children to come to Him. Jesus sought out the tax collectors, the adulterers, the sinners, and the detested. He didn't shun them but recognized that they, too, needed love and fellowship.

In his day the people Jesus sought were not the politicians or the religious leaders. He did not desire an audience with the king or Caesar. He didn't spend His days conversing with the priests in the temple. Jesus was neither a socialite nor a mover and a shaker. He was not a respectable businessman. One only needs to look at the people Jesus associated with to get a sense of His values. What do the groups I named (the outcasts, the poor, the sick, the lame, the children, and sinners) have in common? They were the powerless. Those in power had already decided their fate. It's almost as if a cruel judge had already convicted them without a trial. They were considered weak by society. For them there was no reward, no inheritance, and no hope.

Sadly the world has not changed that much since the days of Jesus. We still live in a world totally out of balance. It's a world built on power. Power is king, and the desire for more power continues a vicious cycle of the power seeking more power without end. Nations still rule through power rather than through the voice of the power. Powerful corporations lobby and buy influence from our so-called political representatives in order to gain more power. All the while politicians run around constantly in a mad dash for more and more power. Then you have the rich and the elite of society. Today we have individuals and groups with seemingly no limits to the pleasures at their disposal. Yet despite having everything, they still want more. Corporations want more, politicians and leaders want more, the

**[Jesus'] ministry was not about the things He could do, but what He was willing to do for others...He didn't want to be known by His power. He wanted to be known by His service.**

rich want more and more and more. As the writer of Ecclesiastes writes, "...the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing" (Ecclesiastes 1:8 NRSV). Power is a hunger that cannot be satisfied.

Our out of balance world goes well beyond this. We still view strength through power. We privilege the strong over the weak. Our world is one where violence still rules. It's a world where we still choose to settle our conflicts through bombs and arms rather than through peace. War after war finds us still killing ourselves, still destroying, and still oppressing. In our nation the power of violence fills our homes, our streets, and our communities. Each day is a daily encounter with new horrors of violence. We wake each morning only to encounter new instances of mass shootings, murder, oppression, racism, hatred, and selfishness. Our world is a world of power through violence, and violence is mistakenly seen as strength.

Why do we tolerate this? We do we privilege power? Why do we want power? Why can we not think outside the realm of power? Why? It's because we are afraid of weakness. Deep down inside we know that everyone can't have access to power. There are limits as to which people and which groups can have power. Inevitably someone is going to be on the wrong side of power. We don't want to be caught on the wrong side of it. Power is a finite resource; there is just not enough of it to go around. Power requires the powerless, which is the main problem with power. There is always the question of power for whom?

Therefore we desire and seek power in whatever form that may be. Weakness has no place in our lives and in our world. We crave more for the sake of having more. We wish for the power to have anything we want just because we can have it. This is the world we live in.

Where is the Kingdom of God? This is certainly not the world that Christ envisioned. Where are the meek? Where are the peacemakers? Where are the poor? Where are those that mourn? I thought these were the ones who would inherit the earth. Instead of valuing the weak, the defenseless, and the humble, we have instead sided with the powerful, the politicians, and the elite. Every day it appears that Christianity in America has more in common with the powerful rather than the powerless. The megachurches, the powerful lobbyists, the fancy suits, the

expensive cars, and even our culture wars portray Christianity as desperate for power.

What is the answer to this? For years I have wondered what needs to change in our world and in our nation. I have wondered what needs to change in Christianity so that it's less about buildings and bank accounts, and more about people. Is there a practice or a symbol that visibly demonstrates the message of Christ? It was then that I re-discovered foot washing.

In that upper room Jesus does something remarkable. It's so subtle and unassuming that it's easy to miss. In this act Jesus does not give any great speeches or profound teachings. There are no great crowds, no sermons on the mount, no raising of the dead, no healing of the sick, and no feeding of the 5,000. Instead Jesus does something so simple, so humble, and so weak that even Christians have for centuries failed to realize its implications. We have failed to realize that the ministry and message of Jesus is found in foot washing. This one act demonstrates what Christianity should be about. It demonstrates that Christianity is not built on strength or power, but on weakness.

You might be asking yourself why I keep using this word "weakness." I first came across this usage of the word in the writings of contemporary theologian and philosopher John Caputo.<sup>2</sup> He uses the word to argue that theology should be weak. He argues that Christianity emphasizes powerful doctrine and dogma at the expense of people. As Christians we argue amongst ourselves about who is right and who is doing it right while forgetting people. We enjoy building systems and great systematic theologies while people remain on the outside. Our theology embraces the wrong values. Instead of seeking power we should embrace weakness.

Weakness is embracing the marginalized and the outcasts. Weakness is identifying with the poor rather than the rich. Weakness is striving for humility. Weakness is a countercultural movement against the selfish, power hungry, violent, and destructive culture that we live in. Weakness is the message and life of Jesus. It's found in the beatitudes, it's found in his life as a servant for others, it's found in his preference for the lowest of the low in the society He lived in. Weakness is the reason He kept saying radical things like, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16 NRSV). Weakness is in His acceptance of death on the cross. Jesus' ministry was weakness.

Weakness is the message of foot washing. It's the message He was imparting to His disciples. It's a message that even His disciples failed to grasp. We are all astounded by Peter's folly. We wonder how He could miss what Christ was doing. However, if we are being honest, we have followed Peter's example more so than Christ. Our first instinct is to say "no" to weakness. We say no to the values Jesus lived and taught. We instead want to be leaders, we want to build great buildings, we want to influence thousands, and we want to do and do and do. But this was never the message of Christ. His message is here in this passage and

**Foot washing sets the example that all deserve to be served. All people, no matter their background, position, or status deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.**

in this act. His message was that we must become servants for others. We must be humble in our hearts and in our actions. Jesus is not asking us to be great. That was never the point. He says, "Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them" (John 13:16 NRSV). We are not meant to be masters. We are meant to be the living, embodied messengers of the example Christ set for us.

Foot washing is a simple act. It involves only a basin of water and a towel. It has no great liturgies attached to it. One is not required to wear any special clothes or vestments. There are no limits in terms of age, race, or sex. In fact, unlike communion, one does not even need to be a Christian to participate. This makes it not just the ultimate symbol of weakness, humility, and service; it is the ultimate symbol of the radical openness that Christ had towards all. For even radical openness is weakness. Only the powerful determine who has access or who is worthy. That night Jesus simply accepted the disciples for who they were. Let us not forget that even Judas had his feet washed. Jesus served, humbled Himself, and placed Himself in a position of weakness for the man who would betray him just a few hours later. If this is not radical openness then I don't know what is.

Foot washing sets the example that all deserve to be served. All people, no matter their background, position, or status deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. In many ways foot washing sets forth an entirely different example than either communion or baptism. Perhaps it may even have a stronger message. Both communion and baptism are an individual act performed by a minister. However, anyone can do foot washing. It is something that we do for each other. We all must serve one another. Service is the message we give to each other and the outside world. We were meant to be humble toward one another. We were meant to embrace weakness for the sake of the other.

Foot washing gives us a living symbol of that message. It's something we can point to as an example of being weak for the sake of others. It's something that can remind us of what it means to be humble, when getting our way is less important

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2. See John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

3. An idea I have graciously borrowed from Dr. David Hines.



**Foot washing is what Christianity is supposed to be about. It's never been about the things that we say. It's not about winning arguments or beating people over the head with scripture.... Today we value winning an argument more than the person we are arguing with. Christianity has nothing to do with the things we say. It's about the things we do.**

than making sure that others are taken care of. Foot washing teaches us that people are more important than doctrine. People are more important than all the differences and barriers we place against each other. Instead of fighting we should be striving for peace with one another.

Foot washing is what Christianity is supposed to be about. It's never been about the things that we say. It's not about winning arguments or beating people over the head with scripture. We live in a debate culture. You can't watch television or use social media without encountering individuals or groups of people arguing against one another. Today we value winning an argument more than the person we are arguing with.

Christianity has nothing to do with the things we say. It's about the things we do. Jesus was recognized as the Christ not because He was a great teacher. We have had plenty of great and worthy teachers across cultures throughout human history. Jesus is the Christ because of the things that He did. That is why foot washing is so important. It is the most important symbol we have to convey that message. This is why I believe Jesus tells us that, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14–15 NRSV). I consider this as one of Jesus' most powerful statements. It is often overlooked or ignored, but I believe it even rivals the Sermon on the Mount in terms of importance. It's important because of its simplicity. Here Jesus teaches by doing. Jesus is essentially saying, "You want to know what you should do? This is what you should do." We need to be serving one another. We need to stop thinking the way the world thinks. We need to stop labeling one another and putting each other in categories. The categories don't matter, master or servant, rich or poor, black or white, Christian or atheist, it doesn't matter. Jesus tells us to serve, embrace humility, and be weak for the sake of the other person.

In order to do this we need foot washing. We need this visible and physical reminder to help us remember what we need to be doing. It completes the journey we start in baptism. For baptism reminds us of our new life in Christ. Communion reminds us of what Christ did for us. Foot washing reminds us of what we should be doing for each other.<sup>3</sup> The life of Christ does not end in Christ. The life of Christ lives on through us in the actions we perform for one another. He lives in our ability to be weak. This is where our strength lies. Not in our own power, but in the weakness and servanthood we live each day.

We as OFWBs shouldn't abandon this practice. It's a symbol of who we are as a denomination. It's a symbol of who we will continue to be in the future. It shows that we are servants not only for each other, but for the world. It shows that as a denomination, we are an open and inviting people. It demonstrates the seriousness we have for others. Foot washing reminds us to embody the life of Jesus into the heart of our worship and ministry for others. Let us be an example to the world of what it means to be weak for the sake of others.