



Footwashing in the Context of 1 Corinthians 11:23-25: Some Theological Reflections

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ABSTRACT

There is the tendency to cite Paul's obvious silence on the rite of foot washing in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 as evidence of not perpetuating the practice in the Christian Church. This study sought to make a case for Paul's silence over foot washing in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. The study used comparative and analytical methodologies to arrive at an understanding of foot washing in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. As a theological paper, this study made clear the status and role of the rite of foot washing as it relates to the Lord's Supper, and why Paul does not address it in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. It was observed that in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, Paul was addressing one of the complaints and anomalies in the Corinth Church, which obviously was the Lord's Supper and not foot washing. Again, Paul did not state foot washing in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 because perhaps his oral source did not mention it. On the other hand, John states foot washing because of his peculiar interest in Jesus' humility. This study, therefore, proposes that foot washing which is unique in John's account reveals some theological understanding. Based upon Jesus' initiative, it should be appreciated as a rite of humility, a rite of acceptance and inclusion in the church of Christ, and ultimately a cohort rite to the Lord's Supper. Paul's silence in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 does not warrant the abrogation of the ordinance because he had a different purpose in mind other than discussing the rite of foot washing. Thus, the use of Paul's silence on foot washing as evidence against its practice in the Christian Church today is a mark beside the point.

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INTRODUCTION

One rite, if one can say so, whose status in the history of the Christian Church that is not firmly established is foot washing. Whilst the synoptic gospels do not record the practice, John's narrative states it in John 13:2-17. John does not only record it but in his narrative records that Jesus gave it as an imperative for the Christian Church (Jhn 13:14). Various interpretations have been given to the meaning and status of foot washing, and it has been a subject of debate throughout the history of the

Christian Church.¹ Yi Wang argues that “The meaning of this story [referring to John’s narrative] is controversial and no consensus has ever been achieved.”² Pieter Post of the Dutch Mennonites confesses that “among Dutch Mennonites, adult baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the only two biblical ceremonies practised today. Footwashing has not been practised in contemporary circles since the nineteenth century.”³ Thus most theologians view foot washing as a localized custom limited to the cultures of Palestine and not normative for cultures of postmodernism.⁴ According to Norman Gulley, “foot washing transcends mere culture. Failure to understand this robs it of its theological meaning, which is as important as that of the bread and grape juice in the Lord’s Supper.”⁵ For Wang, “The foot washing serves as a one-off metaphor of Jesus’ self-humiliating salvific cleansing of sin”⁶ This means that it is not a binding rite for the Christian Church and should not be continued.

Those who subscribe to what can be termed the *command theory*⁷ believe that just as the Lord’s Supper is a command from Christ, foot washing is equally a command and the Lord’s Supper is incomplete without it.⁸ Gulley states that “to omit foot washing, for whatever reason, seems to ignore the fact that foot washing is a command of Christ equal to partake of the bread and wine.”⁹

The problem of foot washing as a Christian rite is further exacerbated by the fact that Paul never states it in 1Corinthians 11:23-34 in his address on the proper observance of the Lord’s Supper. Considering the fact that Paul’s account of the Lord’s Supper predates the Gospel narratives, it is curious that he does not state it. This creates a vacuum that empowers others to fill. This study seeks to probe into why Paul does not state explicitly the rite or ceremony of foot washing in 1Corinthians 11:23-25 whilst addressing the issue of the Lord’s Supper. Thus, the study tries to make a case for Paul’s silence over foot washing in 1Corinthians 11:23-25.

The passage that forms the periscope of this study is 1Corinthians 11:23-25. This is due to the fact that this portion forms a literary unit in Paul’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper in 1Corinthians 11:20-35, and recounts the initial incident of the Lord’s Supper of Christ with his disciples. The paper is therefore delimited to foot washing in the context of 1Corinthians 11:23-25. As a theological paper, this study helps readers to understand the status and role of the rite of foot washing as it relates to the Lord’s Supper and why Paul does not address it in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. The paper makes use of secondary data, and it is organized into four sections, besides the introduction and conclusion. The first section deals with the various scriptural accounts of the Lord’s Supper and foot washing. The second section compares 1Corinthians 11:23-25 with the Synoptic Gospels. The third section offers an analysis of 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 and foot washing, and the fourth section provides theological reflections on foot washing.

Scriptural Accounts of the Lord’s Supper and Footwashing

Before foot washing during the Lord’s Supper can be assessed in the context of 1Corinthians 11:23-25, it is proper to examine the connection that 1Corinthians’ account of the Lord’s Supper has with the other gospels’ account, this may be helpful to give a reason for Paul’s obvious silence on the practice of foot washing during Lord’s Supper. Therefore, this section presents the various scriptural accounts of the Lord’s Supper and foot washing.

¹ Yi Wang, “A Perspective on Footwashing: An Exegetical Experiment on John 3:6-10,” A Term Paper Submitted to Professor Steven Baugh for the Course: New Testament Interpretation NT-500 (California, 2016),1.

² Wang, “A Perspective on Footwashing: An Exegetical Experiment on John 3:6-10,” 1.

³ Pieter Post, “Toward a Theological Link between Baptism, Footwashing and the Lord Supper: Maintaining Unity in the Faith,” *Vision*, 2005, 67–76.

⁴ Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: The Church and Last Things* (Springs, MI: Andrews University, 2016), 405.

⁵ Gulley, *Systematic Theology: The Church and Last Things*, 405.

⁶ Wang, “A Perspective on Footwashing: An Exegetical Experiment on John 3:6-10,” 15.

⁷This is based on Christ’s command given in John 13:14 where Christ instructs “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet (NIV).

⁸ Raoul Dederen, “The Church,” in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 538–81, 558.

⁹ Gulley, *Systematic Theology: The Church and Last Things*, 405.

There are five accounts of the Lord’s Supper in the Scriptures, four from the gospels and one from 1Corinthians 11. It is helpful to view them from a table format, therefore, the table below gives a comparison of the five accounts with regard to the Lord’s Supper and foot washing.

Ordinance	Scriptural Passages				
Lord’s Supper	Matthew 26:17-30	Mark 14:12-26	Luke 22:14-20	John 13:2-30	1Corinthians 11:23-25
Foot Washing				John 13:4-17	

Table 1: The Scriptural Passages on the Lord’s Supper and Footwashing

From table 1 above, it is obvious that all the Gospel writers including Paul in 1Corinthians report on the Lord’s Supper but only John states foot washing in addition to the Lord’s Supper. This has led to several positions and interpretations by several scholars. This paper joins the discussion.

A Comparison of 1Corinthians 11:23-25 with the Synoptic Gospels

It is important to note that the fact that foot washing is stated only in John’s account is not sufficient grounds to deny its perpetuity and practice in the Christian Church. John himself admits that the incidences of Jesus’ life were many and his gospel is a selection of the many acts of Jesus’ life (Jhn 21:25). Luke seems to agree with John that the accounts of Jesus life were many so his account (Luke) is based on his understanding of eyewitnesses’ accounts (Lk 1:1-4). In addition to the selective accounts, even among the synoptic gospels, certain accounts are unique to the individual synoptic gospel writers. In the area of parables, the majority of them are unique to Luke. Examples of such parables are *the Parable of the Prodigal Son* (Luke 15), *the Good Samaritan* (Luke 10) and Jesus’ visit to the home of Mary and Martha in Luke 10.

Amongst the Gospel writers, only John records the turning of water into wine in John 2 and the death of Lazarus in John 11. *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* is unique to Matthew (Matthew 25). John’s particular interest in foot washing must also be cited as one of the reasons why he records that particular incident. Among the Gospel writers, John was the only one among the initial twelve of Jesus’ inner circle who was involved in a power struggle recorded by both Matthew and Mark (Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45). Both accounts end with Jesus’ admonition to his disciples to be servants rather than being served, pointing to his own example of service. This must probably be one of the reasons why John finds Jesus washing his disciples’ feet a true example of humility and that is why probably he is the only one who records it in his gospel.

1 Corinthians 11:20-34 is the first account of the Lord’s Supper written by Paul, however, the Gospel accounts do not portray Paul as being one of the initial twelve who sat around the table with the Lord during the Lord’s Supper before Christ’s crucifixion. Thus, even though Paul states that he received the tradition of the Lord’s Supper from the Lord (1 Cor 11:23) this is to be understood that he had received this account from eyewitnesses of the initial event. Paul only reports as though he had received the account from Christ himself. It is therefore important to compare Paul’s account of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 with that of the Synoptic gospels to see which one of them is similar. This may suggest the source for Paul’s account. John’s account is not included in this comparison because he only states the Lord’s Supper in passing not in detail.

In 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, Paul states: “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this *in remembrance of me*” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, *in remembrance of me.*” (NIV.)

Matthew also accounts in Matthew 26:26-27: “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins...” (NIV).

This is Mark’s account in chapter 14:22-24: “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them and they all drank from it. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them...” (NIV)

Luke records in Chapter 22:19-20: “And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this *in remembrance of me.*” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you...” (NIV)

A comparison of 1Corinthians 11:23-25 with the Synoptic gospels reveals that Luke’s account is closer to Paul’s with the phrase “in remembrance of me.” Whilst all the Synoptic gospel writers and Paul record the incident of the Lord’s Supper, only Luke agrees with Paul that Jesus meant that the Lord’s Supper was to be a memorial of him with the phrase “in remembrance of me.” In the book of Acts, Luke records that he was a travel companion of Paul (Acts 16:16; 20:13; 21:1-2; 27) and this probably might have accounted for their common source since both of them were not eyewitnesses to the Lord’s Supper. This is indicated by Luke in the opening verses of chapter one of his gospel (Luke 1:1-4).

Since Paul’s source for the account of the Lord’s Supper might have been different from John who was an eyewitness himself, and John’s interest in the foot washing that occurred during the Lord’s Supper because of his experience with Christ over humility, Paul’s different source for the Lord’s Supper might have accounted for his neglect in recording the incident of foot washing in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 since his source might not have recorded foot washing.

An Analysis of 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 and Footwashing

Coupled with Paul’s source for the Lord’s Supper and John’s particular interest in foot washing during the Lord’s Supper, it is important to analyse 1Corinthians 11:23-25 to find out why Paul is conspicuously silent on the incident of foot washing during the Lord’s Supper.

Historical Setting of 1Corinthians (11:23-25)

The Church of Corinth was founded by Paul during his second missionary journey (1Cor 18:1-18) and Gordon Fee appraises that Paul founded the church of Corinth around 51-52 AD during which time he wrote 1 Corinthians to address certain concerns that had strained the Church’s relationship with the apostle Paul.¹⁰

Striding between Asia and Italy, Corinth according to Fee controlled the overland commercial traffic between the two regions with its strategic position on the Isthmus that bridged the Peloponnese and the mainland and separated the Saronic and Corinthian gulf. Traders found it safe to drag their goods through Corinth through the Isthmus than through the dangerous Aegean Sea.¹¹

As a commercial city and a crossroads, Corinth attracted different kinds of people from the east to the west with different backgrounds. The Romans who were dominant brought not only their laws

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 4.

¹¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 1.

but their culture and religion, and Corinth as an ancient Greek state maintained its Hellenized background of religion, philosophy and arts. Because of the richness of the City, an aristocracy soon developed with a free spirit and a majority of the lower class was made up of artisans and slaves. In using the metaphor of New York and Las Vegas in the United States for Corinth, Fee posits that the Corinthian church was a reflection of the City.¹² Paul, therefore, addresses those concerns that had strained his relationship with the Corinthian Church, and the Lord's Supper is one of such concerns (1 Cor.11:20-34).

Literary Unit of 1 Corinthians 11:23-25

The book of 1 Corinthians can be divided into four main divisions which are also further divided into subdivisions. Division one (1:1-9) constitutes the main introduction of the entire book of 1 Corinthians. From 1:1-3, the authors of the epistle are introduced coupled with a salutation to the recipients. Division two (1:10-4:21) is an address to the report of divisions that threatened the unity of the Corinthian Church. The issue of factions in the Church is addressed in 1:10-17. Paul further intimates in 1:18-2:16 that the Gospel is the wisdom of God. He further considers the wisdom of God viz. a viz. the wisdom of the world in 2:1-16. From here he continues to address the Corinthians concerning the care and building of the Church in 3:1-4:21. Division three is an address to the issues of immorality and litigations in the Corinthian Church (5:1-6:20). 5:1-13 focuses on reports about incest in the Church of Corinth and 6:1-20 deals with settling litigation and unrighteousness in the Church. Division four (7:1-16:24) is Paul's response to issues of enquiry concerning Marriage (7:1-40), his Apostolic authority (8:1-11:1), misguided Worship, and abuse of Spiritual gifts in the church (11:2-14:40), the hope of the Resurrection (15:1-58) and finally relief for the saint in Jerusalem and his promised visit to the Corinthians (16:1-24).

1 Corinthians 11:23-25 falls within the fourth division of the epistle where Paul addresses a number of issues of which Paul was informed concerning the Corinthian church. One such issue was the abuse of the Lord's Supper. Paul therefore in 1 Corinthians 11:20-34 makes a reparation concerning the proper Lord's Supper. 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 is important to the investigation of foot washing because it is the unit in the entire book and particularly 11:20-34 that specifically recaptures what actually happened during the Lord's Supper before the crucifixion. All the other verses are Paul's concerns about the abuse of the Lord's Supper and his remonstrance with the Corinthian Church. Chapter 11:23-25 is the answer to how the Lord's Supper should be kept according to the example of the Lord. But it is quite curious and strange that Paul does not state foot washing as preceding the Lord's Supper as John does in John 13:2-30. Could it be that in Paul's mind the practice was a one-time event without a perpetual observance of the church, or was it that foot washing was not abused and therefore he felt no concern to talk about it?

Possible Reasons for the Absence of Footwashing in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25

It has already been demonstrated that Paul's account of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 is closer to Luke than any of the Synoptic gospels which may be an indication of a common oral source of the incident. If this is the case then both do not record the incident of foot washing in the context of the Lord's Supper because of the silence of their source as John does because of his peculiar interest in Jesus' humility demonstrated in the act of foot washing.

Again one of the reasons why Paul was silent on foot-washing in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 might be due to his intention of addressing the abuses of the Lord's Supper in the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 11. These abuses are stated in verses 20-22 preceding verses 23-25. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:20-22 states: When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

¹² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 3.

Two cases of abuse are evident from this passage that accounts for Paul citing the Lord's words in the Lord's Supper to address the issue. First, there seems to be a kind of gluttony where those who were affluent go ahead in eating their fill before the arrival of the poor. And second, the poor were discriminated against in the Lord's Supper. Paul, therefore, uses 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 to address the situation citing how the Lord's Supper was before the crucifixion was done and pointing to it as the model for how the Lord's Supper should be kept.

Thus, Paul's intention was not to address any issue concerning foot washing nor is there any indication of a report of misguided foot washing in 1 Corinthians to that effect. Moreover, Paul's source for the foot washing might be different from the account of John in John 13 whose interest led him to select foot washing in the Lord's Supper instead of the details of what happened in the Lord's Supper. For these reasons, it will be unfortunate for anyone to hinge on the absence of foot washing in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 to deny the perpetuity of the rite in the Christian Church.

Theological Reflections of Footwashing

If Paul's address of the abuses of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 and his silence on foot washing does not have any implication for the practice, then what theological meaning can be made from the initial practice as reported by John in John 13:2-30 during the Lord's Supper? It is easily deduced that foot washing in John can be viewed as a rite of humility, a rite of acceptance and inclusion in Christ's Church and then a cohort rite of the Lord's Supper.

Footwashing as a Rite of Humility

Much of the theological understanding and meaning of foot washing comes from the conversation between Jesus and Peter during the act of foot washing in the Lord's Supper in John 13. One such theological understanding is that foot washing is a rite of humility. Two incidents point to this: Jesus putting off his garments and wrapping a towel around his waist to wash his disciples' feet. John 13:4-8 reads:

...So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "you do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, unless I wash you, you have no part with me."(NIV)

As has already been pointed out, the hospitable act of foot washing before a meal was normally done by a person of lower status like a servant or a slave. On this occasion, Jesus the master himself initiated it giving an example of humility to his disciples. This point is strongly echoed by Peter who expresses the shock that the master himself was washing their feet. Later, Jesus enjoins his disciples to do the same if he being the master had stooped to wash their feet (13:13-14). Jesus by this act institutes foot washing as an act of humility for the church to emulate. Any time the rite is performed, it should remind the church of the humility of Christ.

Footwashing as a Rite of Acceptance and Inclusion

When Jesus began to wash his disciples' feet and finally came to Peter, he engaged Jesus in a conversation over the impropriety of his foot being washed by the Lord. Christ's answer to him is instructive. Jesus stated that unless he accepted that service, Peter was not part of him. Here, the theological lesson is that foot washing can be seen as a rite that demonstrates that one is accepted and included in the Church of Christ. It is a church of humble service and only when one has accepted this service is he ready to serve others. To deny or refuse it is to refuse to be accepted into the life of Christ's Church.

Footwashing as a Cohort Rite of the Lord's Supper

Foot washing should be viewed as a cohort rite of the Lord's Supper looking at the context within which it was instituted and the command from Christ for his disciples to follow his example in John 13:13-14: "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet."(NIV)

Gulley notes that "To omit foot washing, for whatever reason, seems to ignore the fact that foot washing is a command of equal to His command to partake of the bread and wine....Footwashing should never be tagged onto the Lord's Supper as an optional addition."¹³ Therefore, in agreement with Gulley, the Lord's Supper is never and cannot be complete without the rite of foot washing.

Summary

There is the tendency to cite Paul's obvious silence on the rite of foot washing in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 as evidence of not perpetuating the practice in the Christian Church. Footwashing as a cultural practice of hospitality continued in the New Testament, however, Jesus gave it a new meaning when he stooped to wash his disciples' feet in John 13. A comparison of the various accounts of the Lord's Supper shows that none of the synoptic gospels state foot washing just as Paul does not in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. From the analysis, it was observed that Paul's account seems similar to that of Luke, which may suggest a common oral source. However, John who not only records foot washing but also states the Lord's Supper does so because of his peculiar interest in Jesus' humility.

An analysis of 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 reveals that Paul was addressing one of the complaints and anomalies in the Corinth Church, which obviously was the Lord's Supper. He uses 1 Corinthians 11:23-35 which reiterates the words of the Lord in the initial Lord's Supper before Christ's crucifixion to address this challenge. Paul does not mention foot washing in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 because probably his oral source did not mention and as the context suggests it was not one of the concerns he was addressing, so to cite his silence as evidence against the practice is a mark beside the point.

CONCLUSION

This study, therefore, concludes that foot washing which is unique in John's account (Jhn 13) reveals some theological understanding. Based upon Jesus' initiative, it should be seen as a rite of humility, a rite of acceptance and inclusion in the church of Christ and ultimately a cohort rite to the Lord's Supper looking at the context within which it was instituted and judging from the command of Christ to the church to follow his example. Ultimately, Paul's silence in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 does not warrant the abrogation of the ordinance because he had a different purpose in mind other than discussing the rite of foot washing.

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¹³ Gulley, *Systematic Theology: The Church and Last Things*, 405.

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