

washing the feet

extract from Proposition XIII § vi

§ vi. . . . Let us consider another example which is similar to that of the bread and wine, described at length in John 13:4-5, 8, 13-15: Jesus rose from supper and laid his garments aside, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel which was around his waist. Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with me." So after he had washed their feet, he said, "Do you know what I have done to you? If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, so that you should do as I have done to you."

Notice that John says that this incident was done at the same time as the other incident of breaking bread. Both were done the night of the Passover, after supper. If we study the circumstances and the way this event is narrated, it was done with far more solemnity, and described far more precisely* and specifically than the former event of breaking bread. That one only says "As he was eating, he took bread," so it would seem to be only an incidental¹ business. But here "he rose," "he laid his garments aside," "he wrapped a towel around his waist," "he poured out water" "he washed their feet," "he wiped them with a towel," "he did this to all of them," which are specific actions far more noticeable than those noted in the former case.

The breaking of bread was a practice common among the Jews, done by all heads of families on that occasion. But the action of washing the feet was more unusual and noticeable,

¹ Latin: *solum quid accidentale fuisse*, "it was only by chance."

both in the manner and in the person doing it, that is for the Teacher to rise up and wash the feet of his servants and disciples. In the breaking of bread and giving of wine, our adversaries do not argue that he specifically put bread and wine into the hands of each one (and it is not mentioned in the text); rather breaking the bread and blessing it, he gave it to the nearest one, and they passed it from hand to hand. But here it is mentioned that he did not wash the feet of one or two, but of many. In the former event he does not say that if they do not eat that bread and drink that wine it will be ruinous* to them. But here he specifically says to Peter that, if he does not wash Peter's feet, Peter has no part with him. Saying this when Peter refused to let Jesus wash his feet, would seem to mean not just the continuance, but even the necessity of this ceremony. In the case of the bread and wine he says, as if in passing, "Do this in remembrance of me": but in the case of washing the feet he sits down, and again he asks them to consider what he has done, and tells them positively that they ought to do to one another what he has done to them, and once again he redoubles that precept, by telling them he has given them an example, so that they should do likewise.

If we consider the nature of the thing, it has as much importance* as either baptism or the breaking of bread, since it is an outward action of cleansing, applied to the outward man, by the command and the example of Christ, to signify an inward purification. To people who make use of their God-given reason and understanding, and don't want to be imposed on or abused by the custom or tradition of others, I seriously propose this question: Does this ceremony of washing feet have as much to recommend it for a standing ordinance of the Gospel as either water baptism, or bread and wine, or any other ceremony, if we take into account the time it was done, the details of the action, or the command enjoining its use? I wonder what reason the Papists can give for not numbering it among their

sacraments, instead of merely *voluntas ecclesiae & traditio patrum*.²

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition XIII § vi (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 392-393 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 301-303.

² “The will of the church & the tradition of the fathers.”