

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

FOOT WASHING AS YOUTH MINISTRY:  
TRADING SUCCESS AND SELF-IMAGE FOR SELFLESS COMMUNITY

SUBMITTED TO DR. KENDA DEAN  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
EF 2352 THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF YOUTH MINISTRY

BY  
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DECEMBER 15, 2014

The Reverend Carmen Rosario, pastor of First Spanish Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn, recently made a thought-provoking comment on ministries which have reached a point where they must evolve or die: "When a church is struggling, it focuses from within, and that's not the mission of the church. If a church stays in that survival mode, it's doing nothing with the community because it's concentrating on solving its own problems [and] doesn't reach out."<sup>1</sup> Due to a changing culture, the lengthening of adolescence, and the blurring of religious lines, youth ministry now finds itself in this precarious position. Exponential change over the past several years has created a challenging context for youth ministers, who constantly seek new ways to make their churches "relevant" in an effort to retain youth. Yet the reliance on image that occurs when ministries fear dying is antithetical to the gospel itself, for it is not based on the love of God and neighbor, but rather on the love of success; it neglects the humility and selfless focus on others to which Christ calls us. Dr. Kenda Dean, professor of Youth, Church, and Culture at Princeton Seminary, has been known to say that the best churches to work with are those which are "used to dying," because they no longer fear it and no longer grasp at an identity of their own making.

I would suggest, then, that a thriving youth ministry is one which dies daily to its own image, goals, and agenda to pursue discipleship and imitation of Christ. The goal of such youth ministry is not simply conversion but nurture; if we are to follow the example of Christ, we must be willing to serve others even if the results are intangible and short-lived. We must be willing to engage in relationships even if they seem to go nowhere. We must let go of the idea of meeting quotas or goals, for it leads to a desire for control and self-sufficiency. If Christ alone is

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<sup>1</sup> Mayah Collins, "Brooklyn's Los Sures Churches Adapt to Neighborhood Change," *New York City Lens*, October 27, 2014, accessed December 13, 2014, <http://nycitylens.com/2014/10/brooklyns-los-sures-churches-adapt-to-neighborhood-change/>.

sufficient, our ministry must be about sharing Christ – not our programs – with others, and leaving the results to the Holy Spirit.

### **A Theology of Foot Washing**

Jesus consistently showed throughout his life that the Kingdom is a radical reversal of power structures, and he dismantled the top-down model of leadership. Jesus' disciples awaited and expected a Messiah who would restore Israel's political power; what they got was a man who made himself unclean by touching lepers, blemished his leadership image by associating with tax collectors and prostitutes, and who was ultimately condemned and killed as an inglorious criminal. In his every action, Jesus taught that power does not compete, conquer, or control. In the economy of the Kingdom, power denies its rights and kneels to serve. This was perhaps demonstrated most clearly during his last Passover with his disciples; the final act that Jesus chose to leave with his disciples exemplifies his model for leadership, authority, and ultimately ministry:

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; 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 was wrapped around his waist... When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "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. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:3-5, 12-15).

Based on this model of leadership and ministry that Christ set in place, youth ministry should arise from what I will call a theology of foot washing – the surrender of identity and self-image to Christ in order to serve others in love and humility. The literal act of foot washing is not widely practiced in the church, although some traditions practice it in conjunction with Maundy Thursday services. The churches of Christ – the tradition in which I was raised – come out of the Restoration movement of the 1800's, a movement in which some of the contributing voices actually practiced foot washing. As the movement progressed, however, literal foot washing was rejected as an outdated social custom.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, however, it has been my observation that as younger generations in the churches of Christ move toward interdenominationalism, they have begun to reincorporate traditions from other streams of Christianity. There is a renewed interest in liturgy, contemplative practices, and embracing the symbols and mystery of the Christian faith. In a few cases, this has included the practice of foot washing.

While foot washing as a literal practice can be a deeply meaningful symbolic experience to those of us who understand its significance, the form itself carries little meaning in our secular culture; therefore, it is first and foremost the function of this act that we must seek to appropriate in our ministries. Cornelis Bennema writes that Jesus' imperative ("You must wash one another's feet") requires mimesis, or imitation; however, his question ("Do you understand what I have done for you?") shows us that his example is not to be replicated blindly. Rather, it is to be interpreted into a meaningful, contextualized demonstration of its underlying principles of

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on how German Baptist doctrine merged with the Restoration movement, see David B. Eller, "Hoosier Brethren and the Origins of the Restoration Movement," *Brethren Life and Thought* 27, no. 1 (winter 1982), pp. 35-54; esp. p. 46 for information on foot washing. For information on Scotch Baptist doctrine, see John Owston, "Scotch Baptist Influence on the Disciples of Christ," *Leaven* 5, January 1, 1997, 38-42 (esp. p. 49), accessed December 13, 2014, <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1809&context=leaven>.

humility and service.<sup>3</sup> After all, if we replicate the action yet retain an attitude of pride or consider ourselves superior in our spirituality, we have missed the point of the principle which Jesus demonstrated.<sup>4</sup> Bennema makes it clear that he is not opposed to the literal practice of foot washing; however, Jesus intended far more.<sup>5</sup>

How then do we remain faithful to a symbol which is no longer widely practiced? How do we take a theology of foot washing seriously, if we do not take it literally? First, we must understand that foot washing leads us toward humility and selfless care for others. Second, we must recognize that when we practice humility, we enter into a spiritual reality which participates in the Kingdom of God. Kenda Dean notes that mimesis denotes far more than simply copying an action; it involves embodiment of and participation with the original.<sup>6</sup> In our imitation of Christ, we are drawn into communion with him. Although a theology of foot washing incorporates aspects of social justice and service, it is more than a moralistic philosophy or a social gospel. It is a theology deeply rooted in the life and example of Christ as he embodies the very nature of a God "who becomes small and poor" to bridge the ontological divide and create relationship with us.<sup>7</sup> We too are to erase the barriers of status and worth that our society has constructed, in order to participate in relationship with others. When we do so, a very real spiritual event occurs: we call a new reality into being as we reject the call of self-preservation and declare the value of those whom we serve. Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche community for persons who are handicapped, points out that we all desire to "be someone, to show who [we

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<sup>3</sup> Cornelis Bennema, "Mimesis in John 13: Cloning or Creative Articulation?", *Novum Testamentum* 56 (2014), 271, accessed December 10, 2014, ATLA.

<sup>4</sup> Bennema, "Mimesis," 269.

<sup>5</sup> Bennema, "Mimesis," 271.

<sup>6</sup> Kenda Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 47.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Vanier, *The Scandal of Service* (New York: Continuum), 15-16.

are] through our origins, qualities, capacities, and basic rights."<sup>8</sup> Yet we are to lay aside all of these arbitrary identifiers and status markers to serve in ways which are subversive to the cultural power structures, in ways which will not make a name for us or help us get ahead. To surrender in this way leaves us insecure and empty, Vanier acknowledges. Yet, like the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, it is in this place of emptiness that the Spirit can begin to work in us.<sup>9</sup>

### **A Starting Point for Youth Ministry**

Jesus' model of foot washing shows us two things about youth ministry. First, the leaders of youth ministry are not to appropriate cultural models of leadership and authority for themselves. Vanier writes that Jesus is calling the disciples to "exercise authority...in a totally new way, a way that is humanly incomprehensible and impossible."<sup>10</sup> Rather than asserting their authority as a means of control, youth leaders should invert the top-down power structure and serve from a place of humility. Second, leadership is to be an example to young people; as Jesus commissioned his disciples to "wash one another's feet," young adults should be shown the value of putting aside cultural values of identity, competition, and success to serve others and create relationships.

The church of middle-class America finds itself in a time and culture where a mindset of foot washing is desperately needed to combat the lies of success and the demons of power which choke out love and humility. Success has become the dominant theme of our culture, exerting pressure on young people to stand out and distinguish themselves from the crowd. As higher education becomes more common, and competition and standards of excellence increase, students are pushed to excel at a younger and younger age. Society – and parents – pressure their

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<sup>8</sup> Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, 44.

children to set the trajectory for their careers are early as middle school, so that they can make the grades necessary to get into the best college, to get into the most prestigious medical school, to become the most distinguished doctor with the highest salary. This pressure robs children of their uniqueness and blossoming creativity – gifts given by God for participation in the Kingdom – and forces them into the mold of competition and self-absorption. Self-denial is challenging yet freeing; it gives adolescents permission to defy the demands of the culture and throw off the labels that their accomplishments – or lack thereof – have garnered. Discipleship is a burden, but it is indeed light compared with slavery to one's image and addiction to power and control.

A theology of foot washing addresses adolescents in their developmental needs without conforming to culture's self-centered way of meeting these needs. One of the main tasks of adolescent development is the formation of identity.<sup>11</sup> Brandon McKoy, in his book *Youth Ministry from the Outside In*, critiques the inadequacy of an identity shaped by an individualistic culture. He writes, "If we understand self as the center of our existence...self-preservation can become our central preoccupation."<sup>12</sup> This need for self-preservation leads us to search out the failures of others in an attempt to prove ourselves superior.<sup>13</sup> Individualism, then, creates an entire culture of self-centered adolescents who are both cripplingly insecure and biting judgmental, unable to find their identities apart from the opinions of their peers. Rather than seeking identity in a shifting and unstable culture, a theology of foot washing locates identity in Christ, where there are no longer any class distinctions (Galatians 3:28). Adele Calhoun writes, "A true Christ-in-me self is deeply at home in God and in its own skin. Such a self humbly

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Oestricher, *Youth Ministry 3.0* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 33-38. Oestricher is not the first to propose identity as a task of adolescence; he builds upon the work of Stanley Hall (1904). Much of developmental psychology revolves around the task of identity formation in adolescence.

<sup>12</sup> Brandon McKoy, *Youth Ministry from the Outside In: How Relationships and Stories Shape Identity* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 35.

<sup>13</sup> McKoy, *Youth Ministry*, 35.

receives its identity as a gift and feels no need to justify its existence. The mirror of public response doesn't matter."<sup>14</sup> When an adolescent encounters the Christ who washes feet, neither the approval nor the rejection of society has meaning any longer. Consequently, when we as leaders serve the young people in our care, we help them understand that their worth – and our willingness to be in relationship with them – is not determined by their success in navigating society's demands. Rather, they have intrinsic value which the example of Christ teaches us to recognize and honor. It is out of this identity that they find the strength to serve, for a theology of foot washing is rooted in a status not worked for but already attained: "Jesus, *[knowing] that he had come from God and was returning to God...* got up from the meal..." (John 13:3, italics added). Only when we recognize our security in Christ can we serve in true humility rather than out of fear or the need for approval. When youth serve others, they further discover that their identity is not wrapped up in culture – as Vanier explains, "Those who are weak help those who are more capable to discover their humanity and to leave the world of competition."<sup>15</sup> Being in relationship with those we serve has a way of revealing to us both the compassion and the selfishness within us, and it brings us to a place of humility where we can experience healing and become who we were created to be.

A theology of foot washing also addresses the need for community and belonging which young adults experience. Community is not easily found in social stratification; not cool enough for the cool group but not daring to be seen with those on the margins, adolescents have a narrow range of peers. Yet when they choose to live in the economy of the Kingdom and the equalizing grace of God, they find in Christ a gentle confidence which frees them from the constraints of hierarchy and becomes an invitation of hospitality to all. Because they belong to the Kingdom of

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<sup>14</sup> Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 191.

<sup>15</sup> Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, 2.

Christ and not the world, they do not have to grasp anxiously at popularity or fitting in. Rather, Christ's example shows them the brokenness of the system and calls them to reshape it. A theology of foot washing gives them permission to subvert society's dictates and break down barriers by serving and creating relationship with those both above and below them.

Finally, adolescents have a need for something larger than themselves, something worth dying for.<sup>16</sup> They are searching for a cause which will ignite their passion – yet the church, in attempting to be relevant, has traded imitation of Christ for the "safe" – yet ultimately fatal – imitation of society. Returning again to the concept of mimesis, Dean writes, "Mimesis of Jesus Christ does not create 'good teenagers' or 'wholesome youth programs.' It creates radicals and prophets – people who reveal the root of cultural deceits with the searchlight of Christ's love."<sup>17</sup> If the church remains at the status quo, offering nothing significantly different from the success-driven culture which preys on the insecurities of adolescents, it holds no real transformative power. However, if young people can begin to see the faults of the system and be persuaded to protest against it rather than conform to it, the church will enter a new season of radical discipleship. Foot washing sounds simple enough, until we actually remove the garments of success which hide our inadequacies and experience the loss of pride as we kneel before our fellow humans. Many times, even the church which professes Kingdom principles reacts against those who put them into practice. To compromise one's reputation the way Jesus did requires a stronger sense of identity and purpose than most of us have. This is no easy task to which we are called, but it is a life worth dying for – and thus a passion worth living for.<sup>18</sup>

The churches of Christ have always placed a strong emphasis on the centrality of Christ and the authority of Scripture as a guide for our lives. By studying the life of Jesus as it is

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<sup>16</sup> Dean, *Practicing Passion*, ch. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 32.

revealed to us in Scripture, we can begin to understand God's counter-cultural ideas of success and power. Following this example, perhaps we too can begin to live into the upside-down economy of the Kingdom: to offer acceptance and healing to the marginalized, to serve the least of these as the greatest, and to wash one another's feet.

### **Moving Towards a Practical Vision**

Arising from a theology of foot washing, the purpose of youth ministry should be to lead youth into a life of discipleship which breaks down existing power dynamics and demonstrates humility in the face of a success-driven culture. Rather than seeking power and recognition by dominating the weak, young people are called to serve the least of these with no regard for status or image, declaring the equality of rich and poor, powerful and oppressed, friend and enemy. As leaders of the church, we are called to teach Kingdom principles to our youth and invite them to participate in Christ's humility. Youth ministry leaders must strike a balance between authority and submission; by kneeling to serve, Jesus did not impose the authority of his position, but neither did he relinquish it. It was not Christ's identity that changed, but the way in which he presented it. Vanier notes, "[Jesus is] a teacher and a prophet, so he does have authority and power. But...before being Lord and teacher, he is a heart seeking to meet other hearts."<sup>19</sup> Stemming from this realization, Vanier helps leaders see the proper expression of authority: "All authority...is intended to help people grow towards greater freedom, justice, and truth. Often, however, it is used for the honour, power, privilege, and positive self-image of those who exercise it. By stooping down to wash the disciples' feet, Jesus calls us all to exercise authority humbly, as a service."<sup>20</sup> We must not neglect the responsibility which leadership entails; we must lead with "force and justice, kindness and firmness" while following Christ on "a path of

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<sup>19</sup> Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, 41.

littleness, forgiveness, trust, communion and vulnerability."<sup>21</sup> From this place of humility, leaders become learners alongside the young people in their ministries. Whenever we make the choice to be others-centered rather than self-centered, we come to a deeper realization of what it means to follow Christ in washing feet. Both the one serving and the one being served come away changed as they encounter the humanity of the other.

A theology of foot washing is Christocentric in its focus, teaching youth how to participate in Christ's reign by serving with the humility which he exemplified. It is paradoxical, seeking to hold the concept of leadership in tension with servanthood, and the gentleness of humility in tension with the confidence and strength of a deeply-rooted identity. Youth should be taught that power is never an excuse to dominate or demean the worth of others, but rather an opportunity and responsibility to serve and create relationship. Perhaps the most effective way to teach is by example, as Jesus did for his disciples at the Last Supper. If youth constantly see their leaders lording power over them, it is likely that they themselves will exploit and control those under them because it is the only way they know to lead. If they see their own leaders modeling humility, however, they will be more likely to lead with grace.

Another way to teach a theology of foot washing is to practice the discipline of humility.<sup>22</sup> The literal practice of foot washing can give students a tangible sense of what it feels like to kneel and serve in ways that are less than glamorous. Most youth ministries encourage their students to serve, but many of them only provide noteworthy opportunities such as after-school tutoring programs or short-term mission trips which polish a resume or garner "likes" on Instagram. While these opportunities are valuable, they can foster the self-centered mindset of seeking fun, "important," or rewarding service, which only perpetuates a sanitized version of

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<sup>21</sup> Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, 83.

<sup>22</sup> For relevant Scriptures and helpful spiritual practices relating to humility, see Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 190-192.

competition and success. We must be careful not to consider ourselves better than those we serve, nor to elevate "cool" service above physically demeaning, thankless tasks such as bussing tables or scrubbing floors, which we tend to relegate to minimum wage, often minority, workers; if we do, we have turned servanthood into a matter of condescension rather than a gateway to relationship. Another way to change youth ministry's attitude toward service is to encourage what David Setran and Chris Keisling call a "discipline of secrecy" – the practice of fasting from others' approval.<sup>23</sup> This could entail a social media fast, or deliberate avoidance of the pronoun "I." Youth leaders should encourage their students to serve quietly and anonymously, as Jesus himself advised (Matthew 6:1-4).

Youth leaders should seek to create an environment which eliminates the need for power and success, which is often motivated by the fear of inadequacy. Although it is inevitable that students will bring these defense mechanisms into the ministry instead of checking them at the door, there are some concrete ways in which youth leaders can create a safe space for the young people in their care. One of these is to play games which encourage teamwork rather than competition. Although it creates excitement and adds a "cool" factor to the ministry, competition contributes to social stratification by breeding pride for the winner, and anger, inadequacy, and/or loneliness for the loser. Youth ministries should also seek to host affordable events, or create space in the budget to cover the cost, so that all students can participate regardless of socioeconomic status. If a ministry fails to do this, it contributes to class distinction; it has failed to wash the feet of its low-income students and their families, and it has failed to teach young people how to consider the needs of others. Finally, youth ministries should teach youth about

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<sup>23</sup> David Setran and Chris Keisling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 47.

service and charitable giving by helping them discover their passions and creating ways for them to express creatively a theology of foot washing.

Because the idea behind foot washing is that it does not seek recognition or honor, it is difficult to evaluate the success of such a ministry. Some students may go on to begin visible projects for which they are praised; others may thrive in quiet encouragement that no one ever knows about. However, the character of a person can be seen in the undisguisable traits of selflessness which manifest themselves in different ways. First, there should be a marked difference in where adolescents locate their identity. Are there signs of fear and "fitting in," or are students comfortable in their own skins and exploring their own thoughts, talents, and creativity? Second, there should be a shift toward others-centeredness rather than self-centeredness. Are students at either extreme of arrogance or insecurity, or are they able to focus on the needs of others and create community? Third, the effectiveness of the ministry can be heard in the vocabulary which students use. What new ideas are they expressing? Towards what goals are they working? How do they view leadership? These are all indicators of whether a ministry is moving in its intended direction.

In conclusion, let us consider this exhortation from Pope Francis, a man who has used his position not to exert power but to wash feet: "May you always know how to exercise authority by accompanying, understanding, helping, and loving; by embracing every man and every woman, especially people who feel alone, excluded, barren, on the existential margins of the human heart. Let us keep our gaze fixed on the Cross: there is found any authority in the Church, where the One who is the Lord becomes a servant to the point of the total gift of himself."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Pope Francis, "Address of Pope Francis to the Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General," May 8, 2013, accessed December 9, 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130508\\_uisg.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130508_uisg.html).

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