

**Assembly Committee for Biblical Doctrine and Polity
of the Church of God of Prophecy
Report to the 100th International Assembly
July 18 – 22, 2018**

Introduction

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:3–6 ESV).

We, the Biblical Doctrine and Polity Committee of the Church of God of Prophecy, echo Paul's words to the Philippian church to you, the delegates of this 100th International Assembly. It is indeed our joy to remember you and our brothers and sisters of the Church of God of Prophecy throughout the world in our prayers. It is our joy to serve in partnership with you for the sake of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We know that He who began a good work in us will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

From the beginning of the history of our Church, we have been committed to the study of the Holy Scriptures. The last paragraph of the minutes of our first Assembly in 1906 states:

It seemeth good to the Holy Ghost and us, being assembled together with one accord, with the Spirit of Christ in the midst, and after much prayer, discussion, searching the Scriptures and counsel, to recommend these necessary things and that they be ratified and observed by all local churches (*Minutes of the Annual Assembly of the Churches of East Tennessee, North Georgia and Western North Carolina, held January 26&27 1906, At Camp Creek, N.C.*, 10).

Every recommendation made at that first Assembly was preceded by due discussion and searching of the Scriptures in a quest to be conformed to the New Testament. Today, we celebrate our 100th International Assembly and we have the same commitment as that of our forefathers of prayerfully dedicating ourselves to the study of the Word of God under the

guidance of the Holy Spirit using proper exegetical and hermeneutical methods to search and to discover the truth, walking in the light to the best of our knowledge and ability.

It is in the spirit of this commitment and obedience to biblical principles that we offer this report on the following issues:

- First, we are grateful to God and to this Church for the broad acceptance and usage of the Statement of Faith presented in the International Assembly of 2016. It is our prayer and intent that the Statement would provide a concise definition to the basic tenets of our faith, a source to foster Bible study, a guide for discipleship, and an introduction of the Church of God of Prophecy to people of all faith persuasions. In this International Assembly, in response to your feedback, we present two minor revisions and a statement on water baptism. This revision completes our Statement of Faith.
- Second, a response to questions raised in our Statement of Faith about the wording of our church membership covenant, in some languages, on the role of the Bible in our doctrine and practice
- Third, the office and role of deacons and deaconesses
- Fourth, the issue of lay pastors' permits for provisional and limited ministerial authority
- Fifth, a reaffirmation of the dynamics for theocratic and hierarchical government
- Sixth, a biblical, theological, historical, and practical study of the practice of footwashing—a first in a series of documents on the sacraments of the Church

We offer this report to you, the leadership and members of the Church of God of Prophecy, for your careful and prayerful consideration, and for your edification. Above all, we offer this report to our Lord Jesus Christ, the Source and Head of the Church.

**I. Statement of Faith:
Rationale and Recommendations for Revisions to the Statement of Faith**

Rationale

For grammatical clarity, and to reflect the punctuation in the classic creeds of Christianity, we recommend the insertion of a comma between “God” and “the Father” in the statement on the Person of God:

Original reading on the Person of God: We believe in one God the Father, creator of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen.

We recommend the following revised reading: We believe in one God, the Father, creator of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen.

Rationale

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . . ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:26, 27 ESV).

²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him (Acts 17:26, 27 ESV).

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9, 10 ESV).

We affirm the biblical truth that all human beings are created in the image of God; that we all descend from common parents, Adam and Eve; and that we all belong to the human race, while celebrating diversity among us.

Therefore, we recommend the following revision to the statement of the Church:

Original reading on the statement of the Church: We believe in one holy, universal Church, composed of all true believers in Jesus Christ, offering fellowship and calling for service to men and women of all races, nations, cultures and languages.

We recommend the following revised reading: We believe in one holy, universal Church, composed of all true believers in Jesus Christ, offering fellowship and calling for service to men and women of all **peoples**, nations, cultures and languages.

We recommend the addition of a statement on water baptism as a part of the Church's commission:

We believe in one baptism with repentance for the remission and forgiveness of sins (This statement will be moved to the end of article 5, and will be reworded as follows: "We believe in one baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.").

Church of God of Prophecy: Statement of Faith

We believe in the Holy Trinity—one God, eternally existing in Three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We believe in one God, the Father, creator of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father.

All things were made through Him and for Him. He is true God and true man. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and was born of the virgin Mary. He suffered, died, was buried, and on the third day, He rose from the dead. He ascended to the right hand of the Father and He will return to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who eternally proceeds from the Father. He is Teacher, Comforter, Helper, and Giver of spiritual gifts. Through Him, the saving and sanctifying works of Jesus Christ are applied to the life of believers. He is the empowering Presence of God in the life of the Christian and the Church. The Father has sent His Son to baptize with the Holy Spirit. Speaking in tongues and bearing the fruit of the Spirit are New Testament signs of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

We believe that salvation is by grace through faith in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross; and that He died in our place. The believer's sins are forgiven by the shedding of His blood. We believe that healing of mind, body, soul, and spirit is available to the believer through the blood of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. We believe in one baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

We believe that the grace of God brings forgiveness and reconciliation to those who repent as well as transformation in holiness, enabling them to live a Christlike life. Sanctification is both a definite work of grace and a lifelong process of change in the believer brought by the blood of Jesus, the Word of God, and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

We believe in one holy, universal Church, composed of all true believers in Jesus Christ, offering fellowship and calling for service to men and women of all peoples, nations, cultures, and languages. We believe in the spiritual and ultimate visible unity of the Church.

We believe that the Bible—both Old and New Testaments—is the inspired Word of God. The Bible is God's revelation of Himself and His will to humankind, sufficient for instruction in salvation and daily Christian living. The Bible is the Christian's rule of faith and practice.

We believe that God will ultimately reconcile all things in heaven and earth in Christ. Therefore, we look forward to new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

II. Covenant Statement

During the presentation of the Statement of Faith to the 99th International Assembly of 2016, it was brought to the attention of the Assembly Committee for Biblical Doctrine and Polity a discrepancy existed between the wording of the Church’s covenant in the Spanish language and the statement about the Bible in our Statement of Faith.

Our Statement of Faith regarding the Bible reads:

We believe that the Bible—both Old and New Testaments—is the inspired Word of God. The Bible is God’s revelation of Himself and His will to humankind, sufficient for instruction in salvation and daily Christian living. The Bible is the Christian’s rule of faith and practice.

The Spanish version of the Covenant reads:

¿Promete usted sinceramente en la presencia de Dios y estos testigos que acepta esta Biblia como la Palabra de Dios, creer y practicar sus enseñanzas correctamente divididas —el Nuevo Testamento como su *única* [itálicas para énfasis) regla de fe y práctica, gobierno y disciplina, y andar en la luz a su mejor conocimiento y habilidad?¹

The English version of the Covenant reads:

Will you sincerely promise in the presence of God and these witnesses that you will accept the [this] Bible as the Word of God, believe and practice its teachings rightly divided—the New Testament as your rule of faith and practice, government and discipline, and walk in the light to the best of your knowledge and ability?²

Even though in 1987 the word “*only*” was not used in the English version of the Covenant, and it does not appear in the 1987 Spanish Assembly Minutes either, it was later inserted in the translation of the Spanish version.

1. We, therefore, recommend the word “*only*” be dropped from the Spanish and any other language version of the covenant, so we can have a unified Covenant.
2. We recommend all translations of the Covenant have the same content.

¹ *Minutas de la 96ta. Asamblea Internacional, 2010, 136.*

² *Ministry Policy Manual, 2016, 55.*

3. We would also like to encourage our ministers to continue administering the membership Covenant to the new members being received into our fellowship.

III. The Office and Role of a Deacon/Deaconess in the Church of God of Prophecy

Introduction

In October 2016, the general presbyters requested the Bible, Doctrine, and Polity Committee to review the office and role of the deacon/deaconess in relation to local responsibilities and accountability. Specifically, the request seemed to be related to the selection, ordination, and licensure process of a candidate to the diaconate. Currently, deacon or deaconess candidates are to be “ordained at the local church or state/national [regional] convention by the overseer, pastor (if a bishop), and other deacons of their local church.”³ This statement prompts at least two questions for consideration. Firstly, “Can a pastor, who is not a bishop (ordained male minister, ordained female minister) officiate at the ordination of a deacon/deaconess?” Secondly, “Does the overseer need to participate in the ordination process?”

An Inclusive Diaconate (Deaconess)

For clarity, the following information is being provided within the context of the ordination of a deacon/deaconess. The office of a deaconess was introduced at the 2006 International Assembly by the Bible, Doctrine and Polity committee.

Given there is scriptural evidence that supports having ‘female deacons,’ called ‘deaconesses,’ we recommend women who qualify as deaconesses be set forth by the local church in the same manner and according to the same requirements as their male counterparts.⁴

³*Minutes of the 89th Assembly*, “Assembly Committee for Biblical Doctrine and Polity,” 1996, 35.

⁴*Minutes of the 94th Assembly*, “Assembly Committee for Biblical Doctrine and Polity,” 2006, 176.

The 2006 International Assembly accepted the Bible, Doctrine and Polity report regarding deaconesses in the church and it has been a matter of practice, although perhaps limited in scope, for the last decade. The requirements for and processes of an individual being “set forth” to the diaconate were addressed by the 89th International Assembly in 1996. In that Assembly, the Bible, Doctrine, and Polity report included a recommendation titled “Deacon.” The reference above, indicates these qualifications and expectations, except for gender, are applicable to the office of a deaconess as well. Consequently, this is being provided to give an informed perspective. The following section is included in the 1996 Assembly minutes as having been accepted as polity.

Both biblical and historical records, concerning the activities of deacons, confirm they served in the church alongside and in harmony with the bishop or pastor as servants to the congregation. They were assigned responsibilities which contribute to the spiritual and social well-being of the congregation. This office functions to: 1) complement the office of the bishop (Acts 6:1–7); b) serve more in the temporal needs of God’s work, rather than in teaching and presenting the Word; and c) minister to the needs of the poor and needy (Acts 6:1–5). They constitute a vital part of local church government (Philippians 1:1). The qualifications of a deacon are similar to a bishop, except they are not required to teach or have direct oversight of the flock. Their qualifications are taken from the scriptural references of 1 Timothy 3:8–12 and Acts 6:4 (as a prototype). The New Testament account regarding the office and function of deacons gives very clear understanding that their activities are generally confined to and carried out in the local congregation. This ministry is local, rather than translocal [sic].

Since deacons function in the arena of a local church, we recommend that they be acknowledged (set forth) by the congregation and with pastoral recommendation. They will serve first as trial deacons for a period of not less than one year, after which time they are to be recommended to the state/national overseer of their respective area for approval and licensure. Because their service and ministry are based more within a local area, there would be no need for them to be licensed through the International Office. *He is to be a male and at least 30 years of age*⁵ (italics not in original).

Deacons would be ordained at the local church or state/national convention by the overseer, pastor (if a bishop), and other deacons of their local church. The deacons should report quarterly to their local conference and annually to the state/national overseer. Should discipline become necessary, the local church would work in conjunction with the state/national office. When moving to a new location, the eldership status would continue, but would need reaffirmation from the new congregation after an appropriate time. The International Offices will produce a standardized license for those ordained as a deacon.⁶

In summary, the current process of deacon/deaconess ordination is as follows:

- The diaconate candidate is selected on a one-year trial basis by the local church and pastoral recommendation.
- The candidate is to fulfill all scriptural prerequisites.
- After the one-year trial basis, the candidate *may* be recommended for ordination as a deacon/deaconess.
- The ordination of the candidate is to occur either at the local church or the state/regional/national convention.
- The overseer is to participate in the ordination ceremony along with the pastor (if a bishop) and any other deacons from the candidate's local congregation.
- Deacons/deaconesses are to report quarterly to the local church and annually to the state/regional/national office.
- The office of deacon is not translocal; consequently, in the event of a deacon/deaconess transferring his/her membership from one local church to another, the recognition to the diaconate is subject to the discretion of reaffirmation by the new local church for the individual to serve as a deacon/deaconess.

⁵This statement was eliminated by the 2006 Assembly.

⁶89th Assembly Minutes, 1996, 34–35.

Hierarchical Polity

In the 2006 Assembly, referenced above, the Bible, Doctrine, and Polity committee included a statement in their report titled, “The Dynamics of Theocratic and Hierarchical Government.”

This statement immediately followed the section addressing deaconesses in the church. An excerpt of this statement is as follows:

We hereby declare this Church to be a body striving to operate under theocratic principles in all spiritual, ministerial, and inspirational areas, but to recognize that we also function as a hierarchical government to maintain proper order and discipline in all areas pertaining to business and management of our organization. While this statement is being given to clarify our present type of government, this position has been reflected by past Assembly decision and court rulings throughout our history.⁷

It seems that the spirit of hierarchical governance within this Church body is exhibited in the current practice of the respective overseer officiating at the ordination of candidates to the diaconate. Admittedly, there are many leadership roles within a local church in which the overseer does not participate in the selection or installation processes. However, it may be argued that these other roles do not rise to the level of “eldership” both biblically and within the context of the church.

Recommendation

As stated in the “Introduction” of this working document, the current policy of ordination to the diaconate is that candidates are “ordained at the local church or state/national [regional] convention by the overseer, pastor (if a bishop), and other deacons of their local church.”⁸

⁷*Assembly Minutes*, 2006.

⁸*Minutes of the 89th Assembly*, “Assembly Committee for Biblical Doctrine and Polity,” (1996), 35.

We recommend that no change in the ordination process of an individual to the diaconate occur as it relates to the laying on of hands by the overseer. That is, the deacon/deaconess should continue to be ordained by the overseer and local church pastor, along with local deacons, within the context of the local church or at the state/regional/national convention. The location of ordination should be left to the discretion of the overseer. Additionally, should the overseer be unable to participate in the ordination of a deacon due to scheduling conflicts, health issues, geographical distances, etc., the overseer may designate a representative of his office, such as a district overseer/presbyter, to participate alongside the pastor in the deacon ordination due to the absence of the overseer.

Secondly, we recommend that the current policy relative to the pastor's participation in the ordination of a deacon be amended. The parenthetical phrase "(if a bishop)" should be eliminated. This phrase, "if a bishop" implies that a deacon/deaconess may occupy a higher positional status than an ordained male minister or an ordained female minister who is his/her pastor and not an ordained bishop. There should be no question that the deacon/deaconess is to serve under and in support of his/her pastor. The deacon/deaconess should view themselves as a servant leader to both his/her pastor and the congregation. Consequently, it is the recommendation of this report to the 100th International Assembly that a duly licensed Church of God of Prophecy minister, serving as the appointed pastor of a respective church, is to participate in the ordination of deacons/deaconesses at the local church where he/she serves as pastor, under the leadership of the respective overseer.

IV. Provisional Lay Pastor Ministerial Permits

Rationale

Due to the need of supplying pastors to churches in situations in which licensed ministers were in short supply or nonexistent, lay ministers and those who were called into ministry, but not yet licensed, have sometimes been given temporary, provisional permits authorizing them to do the work of pastoral ministry (baptize, administer the Lord's Supper, conduct business meetings, etc.)

These provisional permits were often issued in the form of a minister's ID card. overseers who issued these provisional permits did so with the intent that the recipient would proceed to fulfill the requirements for licensure, beginning as a lay minister. However, it has often been the case that recipients of the provisional permits were content with their status and privilege and did not pursue a valid minister's license, continuing to execute duties designated for licensed ministers only.

Recommendations

Therefore, we recommend that:

- Only newly appointed lay pastors (holding valid lay ministers' certificates) may be issued provisional permits authorizing them to perform pastoral duties normally reserved for licensed ministers (to baptize, administer the Lord's Supper, and moderate business conferences, etc.), when no licensed ministers are available to pastor a church.
- The permit will authorize the lay pastor to perform these pastoral duties only in the local church to which he/she has been appointed.
- The permit will be issued in the form of a letter, with clear limitations for validity, to extend from the term of appointment (i.e. for the convention term) to not more than two years.
- During the two-year period, the lay pastor must be faithful in reporting to the state/national/regional office.

- At the end of two years, the permit will expire and will not be renewed.
- During the two-year period, the lay pastor holding the temporary ministerial permit will be expected to complete the requirements for a valid minister's license, issued by the general overseer's office.
- Lay pastors, holding lay ministers' certificates, cannot perform marriage ceremonies. However, if a couple has been previously legally married in a civil ceremony, a lay pastor may perform a Christian ceremony to bless the marriage of that couple, if they attend his/her local church.
- If, at the end of two years, the lay pastor holding a temporary provisional permit has not obtained his permanent minister's license, he/she may continue to serve as a lay minister, but without authorization to perform the ministry of a duly licensed pastor.

V. The Dynamics of Theocratic and Hierarchical Government Rationale

In a previous meeting with the BDP and the general presbyters, General Overseer Sam Clements shared his concern that in some areas of the world, particularly in North America, there is an increasing tendency of local churches attempting to adopt a congregational structure in the selection of their pastor, rather than the hierarchical governance, which is both the historical and polity form of government adopted by this church in our International Assembly.

The BDP Committee would like to restate the Church's position in the selection and the appointment of pastors. It might be helpful, however, to define the meaning of a church ruled by congregational government. According to Donald K. McKim, the congregational form of government is as follows. Congregational government is “. . . [a] form of church government in which governing authority is with the local congregation, which is autonomous and independent.”⁹

⁹ Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 58.

The Church of God of Prophecy has never adopted a congregational form of government. Referring to the *Minutes of the 94th General Assembly of 2006*, we would like to restate our position:

From the inception of this Church body at the beginning of the twentieth century, our pioneering fathers realized the powerful dynamics of recognizing that in all ministerial and spiritual operations that we were to pattern ourselves after the theocratic principles of the Bible. At the same time, the wisdom of early church Assemblies also realized the critical need to develop a system of hierarchical government in all matters of business pertaining to property, monetary operations, and legal matters. This dynamic requires us as ministers and members to confess that this important balance would be needed to function in a secularized society that did not often reflect a belief in a “direct rule of God through Spirit-filled leaders.” We hereby declare this Church to be a body striving to operate under theocratic principles in all spiritual, ministerial, and inspirational areas, but to recognize that we also function as a hierarchical government to maintain proper order and discipline in all areas pertaining to business and management of our organization. While this statement is being given to clarify our present type of government, this position has been reflected by past Assembly decisions and court rulings throughout our history (*Minutes of the 94th General Assembly (2006)*, 177).

The church has made it clear that it attempts to operate within the principles of a theocracy while exercising a hierarchical form of government. With that said, the Assembly Minutes stipulates that the overseer, 'in consultation with the local church' goes through a process of selecting a pastor. After a time of consultation, which would include prayer and deliberation, a selection is made. It is the overseer, functioning in his administrative and apostolic duties, who

makes the final decision, consequently making the official appointment of the local pastor. The local congregation does not select their respective pastor.

The overseer's appointive duties are as follows according to the 2016 *Ministry Policy Manual*, page 31:

1. To appoint pastors in consultation with the local church and minister
2. To appoint national/regional/state staff
3. To appoint a national/regional/state ministerial review board
4. To appoint national/regional/state boards and committees as needed
5. To appoint district overseers and any other personnel necessary to administrate the national/regional/state programs

Recommendation

The Assembly Committee for Biblical Doctrine and Polity for the Church of God of Prophecy humbly submits this document in restating the Church's position on appointment of pastors for local churches by the national/regional/state overseer.

VI. The Sacrament of Footwashing

Introduction and Rationale for the Study of the Sacraments of the Church

The Church of God of Prophecy has historically acknowledged three ordinances or sacraments: Water Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Footwashing. Simple, straightforward, biblical explanations have for many years been printed in our publications and guidelines have been established for their practice in our International (General) Assemblies. Sermons and Bible studies have been expounded from our pulpits and lecterns. However, while we have confessed the importance of the sacraments in the life of our Church, it seems the actual practice of the sacraments has declined—especially the practice of Footwashing, and to a lesser degree, the Lord's Supper and Water Baptism. We have endeavored to discern the reasons for this decline: Is it a lack of strong biblical and theological foundation and understanding for these practices? Is it

a lack of inspired preaching and teaching on these subjects? Is it a loss of anticipation and joy in the celebration of the sacraments, through lifeless, lackadaisical, perfunctory observance? Is it because we have lost a sense of reverent wonder and awe in the presence of The Holy? Whatever the reason may be, we feel that many of our people are being deprived of profound blessings and spiritual refreshing associated with these sacraments.

Three years ago, the Biblical, Doctrine, and Polity Committee deeply felt the necessity and responsibility to return to an intensive and thorough study of the sacraments. We were convinced that, as a Church, we desperately needed to recover a biblical, theological, doctrinal, historical, and practical working knowledge of the sacraments. We felt the need to help inspire and encourage more sacred, faithful, and frequent participation of the sacraments in our churches and among the members of the Church of God of Prophecy. As a result, we have begun the task of preparing documents on these worthy subjects. The task has become more daunting and challenging than we had first imagined. Nevertheless, to this 100th International Assembly of the Church of God of Prophecy, we offer the first document in the series on the sacraments.

Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet

“Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, ‘Lord, are you going to wash my feet?’ ⁷ Jesus answered, ‘You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.’ ⁸ Peter said to him, ‘You will never

wash my feet.’ Jesus answered, ‘Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.’⁹ Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!’¹⁰ Jesus said to him, ‘One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.’¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, ‘Not all of you are clean.’

“¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you?’¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. ¹⁸ I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, ‘The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’ ¹⁹ I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. ²⁰ Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.’”¹⁰

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), John 13:1–20.

Introduction

Washing the feet of the saints has been a longstanding practice in the Church of God of Prophecy. The first mention we have in our records about this ordinance is found in the *Minutes* of our first Assembly, in 1906. The following paragraph gives testimony to this fact:

Communion and feet-washing were duely [sic] discussed by elder R. G. Spurling and others, and it is the sense of this assembly that the communion and feet-washing are taught by the New Testament Scriptures, and may be engaged at the same service or at different times at the option of the local churches. In order to preserve the unity of the body, and to obey the sacred Word, we recommend that every member engage in these sacred services. We further recommend that these holy ordinances be observed one or more times each year.¹¹

As we can see from this paragraph, our forefathers were convinced that footwashing was taught by the New Testament. For that reason, they needed to engage in the practice of the same. It is noteworthy that they gave two motives for footwashing and communion: 1) to preserve the unity of the body, and 2) to obey the sacred Word. This should be the same motivation for us as we continue obeying God's word and promoting the unity of the body. It is with this same spirit of preservation of unity of the body and obedience to the Word of God that we present this document to the Church.

History of Footwashing in the Church of God of Prophecy

When we trace the history of footwashing in our tradition, we must go back to the Christian Union, organized August 19, 1886 at Barney Creek, Tennessee. This group had its genesis because "a spirit of dissatisfaction and unrest began to work in the mind of a licensed minister of the Missionary Baptist Church by the name of Richard G. Spurling."¹² A. J. Tomlinson describes the dissatisfaction as originated by "certain traditions and creeds which were burdensome and

¹¹ *Minutes of Annual Assembly of the Churches of East Tennessee, North Georgia and Western North Carolina, held January 26&27, at Camp Creek, N.C., 3.*

¹² A. J. Tomlinson, *The Last Great Conflict*. (Cleveland, TN: Press of Walter E. Rodgers, 1913), 205.

exceedingly binding on the members.”¹³ Spurling and the other original members of the Christian Union, who were from Landmark and Primitive Baptist backgrounds, were familiar with the practice of footwashing and he is credited as the one who introduced this practice to the church.¹⁴

For A. J. Tomlinson, footwashing was a new experience, since this practice was prohibited by Quakers.¹⁵ However, it looks like he had seen footwashing being done by other Christian groups and became familiar with it. Tomlinson’s first experience with footwashing is recorded in the entry of his diary on March 25, 1901, at Culberson, North Carolina:

After a special outpouring of the Spirit in our Sunday meeting yesterday. I could not take my breakfast as usual. At night, we had special prayer... and I read the words of Jesus that we receive the petitions we desired because we keep His commandments. I then turned, guided by the Spirit, and read where Jesus washed the disciples’ feet and said, ‘Ye ought to wash one another’s feet’. I had never obeyed this commandment. I at once laid aside my coat, girded myself with a towel, poured water into a basin and washed the feet of the brethren present. Other members of our household became more zealous to keep the commandments.¹⁶

It is remarkable that Tomlinson recognized that he had “never obeyed this commandment” before and that he immediately proceeded to obey it, and not only him, but other members of his household as well. The willingness of our forefathers to obey the word of God during those early years paved the way for their commitment to adopt these ordinances at their very first Annual Assembly, as we mentioned before. Tomlinson recorded the sentiment of the group: “It is the sense of this assembly that the communion and feet-washing are taught by the New Testament Scriptures,”¹⁷ and for them, who were a group of people searching the Scriptures in their quest

¹³ Tomlinson, *The Last Great Conflict*, 205.

¹⁴ Wade H. Phillips, *Quest to Restore God’s House: A Theological History of the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee)*, vol. I, 1886–1923 R. G. Spurling to A. J. Tomlinson. Formation-Transformation-Reformation (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2014), 336–37.

¹⁵ Phillips, *Quest to Restore God’s House*, 337.

¹⁶ *Diary of A. J. Tomlinson 1901–1924* (Cleveland, TN: White Wing Publishing House, 2014), 12.

¹⁷ *Minutes of Annual Assembly*, 3.

for truth, this reason was satisfactory enough and as such, they were willing to obey. In that first Assembly, they made two recommendations: 1) that every member engage in these sacred services, and 2) that these holy ordinances be observed one or more times each year. As we can see, these recommendations were invitations to the members to participate in these ordinances taught by our Lord Jesus Christ. Not only did they make the commitment to observe these ordinances one or more times a year during their First Assembly, but during the last day of the Second Assembly, Sunday, January 13, 1907, Tomlinson recorded: “After the sermon the Church engaged in the sacred ordinances of ‘The Lords [*sic*] Supper and Feet Washing.’”¹⁸

As the church matured, the primary recommendation became an expectation from the applicants for membership in the church. The rationale given for that expectation was that As Jesus Christ is the sole founder and originator of His Church, and still retains the position as head and only lawgiver, all who connect themselves with His Church will be expected to obey His laws and government, walking in the light as He is in the light, thus giving fellowship to each other and the assurance of the blood cleansing from all sin. (1 John 1:7).¹⁹

In this way, the practice of footwashing had to be accepted alongside other biblical teachings that were already part of the teachings of the church if you wanted to become a member. In this statement, we find the language that Jesus is the ‘lawgiver,’ that we are ‘expected to obey His laws and government,’ and that we must ‘walk in the light as He is in the light,’ that is used to compel the acceptance and observance of the biblical teachings. A. J. Tomlinson further states:

The applicants for membership are expected to accept the teaching of repentance, water baptism (by immersion), sanctification subsequent to conversion, the baptism with the Holy Ghost on the sanctified life evidenced by the speaking in tongues as the Spirit gives utterance, the Lord’s Supper, feet washing, eternal punishment for the wicked and eternal life for the righteous,

¹⁸ *General Assembly Minutes 1906–1914*, 39.

¹⁹ Tomlinson, *The Last Great conflict*, 216.

divine healing, tithing and offerings, and the second pre-millennial [sic] coming of the Lord.²⁰

Through the years, some questions arose regarding the procedure for footwashing. In the 7th General Assembly of 1912, the following question was asked: “In observing the ordinance of footwashing, should one foot be washed or both feet? Answer: Both feet. John 3:10–14.”²¹ It was reiterated that both feet were to be washed. It looks like this answer was accepted by the Assembly delegates.

In the first Assembly, the recommendation was made that “communion and feet-washing may be engaged in at the same service or at different times at the option of the local churches.” However, in the thirteenth Assembly of 1917, it was recorded that after careful examination of the Scriptures, they found that both ordinances were inseparable. In the Supplemental section of the Minutes of that Assembly we read:

1. The Lord's Supper and feet washing. After careful consideration of the subject, and examination of the Scriptures it was decided that the two are inseparable, and one should follow the other in succession in the same service. These sacred ordinances should be practiced openly and not in some secret chamber where outsiders are excluded.²²

²⁰ Tomlinson, *The Last Great conflict*, 217.

²¹ 7th General Assembly, 01/12/1912, 19.

²² 13th General Assembly, 11/1–6/1917, 37.

Thus, the emphasis was given to have both ordinances observed together and publicly. Again, in 1968 the question about having both ordinances at the same time was brought to the Assembly.

QUESTION:

Should a minister in the Church ever give Communion without following it with Feet Washing? If so, under what circumstances should this be done?

ANSWER:

The practice is for Feet Washing to always follow Communion when possible.²³

The answer to this question reiterated the previous position of the Church of having both ceremonies consecutively, however, the phrase “when possible” brings with it the possibility of having footwashing at a different time.

Another development had to deal with the lack of a male evangelist being available in isolated places to administer the ordinances of communion and footwashing, and allowing a female evangelist to administer these sacraments. The question was asked:

Q. Should a female evangelist administer the Lord’s supper and feet washing?

A. This has been considered permissible in isolated places when it was not convenient to secure the services of a male minister.²⁴

The 89th General Assembly of 1996, approved the recommendation of the Biblical Doctrine and Polity Committee that allows women ministers to administer the Lord’s Supper and footwashing.²⁵

²³ 63rd General Assembly, 09/16/1968, 117.

²⁴ 27th General Assembly, 09/7–13/1932, 53.

²⁵ 89th General Assembly, 07/8–14, 1996, 40–41

Not participating in footwashing was a matter of serious consideration in the church. The following question was brought at the 28th General Assembly:

Q. What about members that will not practice feet-washing?

A. When they come into the Church they promise to do this, and if they will not, what are they? I think Revelation 21:8 will get pretty close to them. Such members should be talked to and prayed with until they become willing.²⁶

From the Scripture used in the answer,²⁷ we can see that avoiding the practice of footwashing was considered as something with grave consequences, since the member was placed in the same category and doomed to the same fate as those listed in the verse. Of course, that was Brother A. J. Tomlinson's answer, but we should take into consideration that he also recommended to talk to and pray for those members until they become willing.

With the passing of time, some churches neglected the observance of the Lord's Supper and footwashing. This was brought before the 57th Assembly by M. A. Tomlinson, in his Annual Address, in the section entitled Lord's Supper and Washing of the Saint's Feet:

Some churches had let an entire year pass without observing the Lord's Supper and feet washing one time. According to the Scripture, these ordinances are sacred, and we feel that we are not properly measuring up to the Scripture when we neglect to observe them.

We, therefore recommend that the question: Did Church observe the Lord's Supper and feet washing this month?" be added to the monthly report for the minister to the state overseer.²⁸

The concern raised by M. A. Tomlinson was that the church was not properly measuring up to the Scripture when the practice of the ordinances was neglected. The ensuing recommendation to include the question about the observance of communion and footwashing in the pastor's monthly report was given to ensure that our ministers and churches were obeying the

²⁶ 28th General Assembly, 09/13–19/1933, 50.

²⁷ "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death" (Rev. 21:8 NRSV).

²⁸ 57th General Assembly, 09/4–10/1962, 134.

Scriptures and following up the recommendations of previous assemblies.

The last update to our teaching regarding footwashing was done in 2008 as recorded in the *Biblical Principles, Beliefs, and Practices of the Church of God of Prophecy*. It reads as follows:

WASHING THE SAINT'S FEET

Feet Washing was instituted by Jesus on the night of the Last Supper and is considered by the Church a New Testament ordinance which we are enjoined to observe. As the Lord's Supper represents our communion with Christ, Feet Washing represents our common unity (community) with each other as followers of Christ and partakers together with Him. Jesus sent two of his disciples to the home of a special friend in Jerusalem to prepare for the Passover meal (Mark 14:12–17). These preparations would have included a basin, water pitcher, and a towel for the customary washing of feet. According to verse seventeen above, the twelve came with Jesus, but there is no mention of the washing of feet. Luke tells us there was anguish among the disciples as Jesus announced that one of them would betray Him and also that there was a quarrel between them as to who should be the greatest (Luke 22:24–27). Jesus taught them servant-hood as their right relationship (verses 25–27) and demonstrated His posture as a Servant among them by washing their feet (John 13:3–5). In establishing this spirit of servant-hood among them Jesus said: "...Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that ye should do as I have done to you...If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them" (John 13: 12–15; 17). The Church encourages that Feet Washing be observed in the same service as the Lord's Supper whenever possible and in a decent and orderly manner.²⁹

There are some themes that we can highlight from this updated version. First, it recognizes that we are enjoined to observe this ordinance because it is a New Testament teaching. It also emphasizes the communal aspect of our relationship. While the Lord's Supper represents our communion with Christ, footwashing represents our communion with one another. It also accentuates that we are servants one of another, following the example of Jesus, who being Lord and Master, washed the feet of the disciples, and commanded us to wash one another's feet. It also let us know that the Church encourages that footwashing be observed in the same service as

²⁹ *Biblical Principals, Beliefs, and Practices of the Church of God of Prophecy*, (Cleveland, TN: White Wing Publishing House, 2008), 16–17.

the Lord's Supper, but suggests "whenever possible" and in a decent and orderly manner. It opens the possibility for having both ordinances observed at separate times, if conditions are not appropriate. We sense that this updated version is divested of a legalistic spirit which enforces the observance of these ordinances; instead, it encourages us to observe it in a spirit of obedience to the New Testament, of servanthood and brotherly love toward one another.

Theological Significance of Footwashing

Footwashing was not strange to the disciples, since it was practiced not only in their world, but also by the Greeks and the Romans. John Christopher Thomas informs us that footwashing was practiced in the Jewish world for different purposes, such as: cultic settings (Ex. 30:17–21; 40:30–32); personal hygiene and comfort (2 Sam. 11:8–11; 19:24 and Cant. 5:3); hospitality (Gen. 18:4, 19:2, 24:32; 43:24), and servitude (1 Sam. 25:41).³⁰ In the Jewish world, footwashing was an act mainly performed by servants. As an act of hospitality, the host could invite you to his house, provide for water and towel, but rarely wash your feet. Either you washed your feet or a servant washed them for you. Thomas states that "there is so much an identification of servants and footwashing that the footbasin [sic] comes to function figuratively as a sign of servitude," and that "those who receive footwashing are always the social superiors of those who render the service."³¹ Thomas adds that "in cases of deep love or extreme devotion a host or loved one might wash the feet of another. Due to its humble nature, the performance of such an act demonstrates tremendous affection, servitude, or both."³² In the Graeco-Roman world, slaves were the ones in charge of washing the feet of the guests and "footwashing could

³⁰ John Christopher Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (London: T&T International, 2004), 27–41.

³¹ Thomas, 42.

³² Thomas, 42

be used as a synonym for slavery.”³³ Thomas also comments that “to wash another’s feet symbolized the subjugation of one person to another. Therefore, those who received footwashing from another were social superiors of those who performed the task.”³⁴ Remarkably, even in the Graeco-Roman world, there were exceptions that “on rare occasions an individual might perform this chore without obligation as an act of love and honor. In these exceptional situations love is often the motivation for such service.”³⁵

In the New Testament, we find several instances where footwashing occurred. One of those is when Jesus was invited by Simon, a Pharisee, to a meal (Lk. 7:36–50). We know that an uninvited guest, who is only identified as a sinful woman, appeared at the house while they were dining. This woman, bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, kissed them and anointed them with ointment from her alabaster jar (vv. 37, 38). When Simon questioned and disqualified the actions of this woman due to her sinful nature, even doubting Jesus’ claims as a prophet, one of Jesus’ complaints towards him was that he “did not give him water for his feet,” maybe implying that he was violating the rules of hospitality. What Simon failed to do, this woman did, not with water, but with tears and ointment. Thomas highlights the subordinate state of this woman, because she is frequently mentioned by her sinful status, and indicates that “her use of perfume instead of water also suggests love as the motive for the action.”³⁶

Another occurrence of footwashing towards Jesus was when he was invited to dine with Mary, Martha and Lazarus (John 12:1–8). On this occasion, Mary anointed Jesus’ feet with a costly perfume made of pure nard, and wiped them with her hair. This action prompted Jude’s protest, under the false pretension of caring for the poor. To counter his protest, Jesus replied: “Leave her

³³ Thomas, 56.

³⁴ Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*, 56.

³⁵ Thomas, 56.

³⁶ Thomas, 57.

alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial” (v.7). Thomas says that Jesus defended this “elaborate anointing as justified because it is preparation for his burial,” so, for him, “John 12:7 adds a new dimension which may relate to the significance of Jesus’ own actions in John 13.”³⁷ This new dimension has to do with his passion, death, burial and resurrection, in other words for his departure from this world to the Father.

As we have seen, footwashing both in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman world had some similarities. Some of these included that footwashing was done usually in preparation for a meal, and done by the person himself, or by servants or slaves, and in rare occasions by the host, out of deep love, honor or affection towards the guest. From the New Testament examples, we saw that two women, out of deep love, washed Jesus’ feet, using tears, ointment and perfume instead of water.

This information is important, since it gives the background evidence about how footwashing was done in the ancient world and by whom. Now, Jesus, knowing that “his hour has come to depart from this world and go to the Father” (Jn. 13:1) will set the example for his disciples about true servanthood. John says that Jesus, “having loved his own, who were in the world, loved them to the end.” As John stated in the prologue:

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God (John 1:11, 12 NRSV).

Here, in chapter 13, John mentions those whom Jesus calls His own, who had become children of God, because they had believed in Him. To those, Jesus loved to the end, and will wash their feet. Thomas states that the expression ‘to the end’ could mean both that Jesus “loved his own until the end of his life and he loved them completely, as his death indicates.”³⁸

³⁷ Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*, 58.

³⁸ Thomas, 82.

It is significant to note that John makes clear that Jesus and the disciples were already dining, and that Jesus “got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him” (vv. 4–6). For the disciples, this action was something unusual since we already know that footwashing was done before the meal, not during or after it.

What Jesus is doing goes beyond the practice of hospitality that they already knew because they were now in the process of dining. For them it is striking to see Jesus, not only taking off His outer robe and tying a towel around Him, but also, pouring water into a basin, washing and wiping their feet with the towel. Jesus did everything the slaves did with guests. This action is scandalous to them, since footwashing is done by servants or slaves.

Jesus’ action shocked Peter in such a way, that without understanding the spiritual significance of what Jesus was doing, emphatically rejected the act of footwashing. His rejection was stated by a double emphatic negative (οὐ μή ου με): “You will never wash my feet for ever” (13:8). By telling Jesus: “You will *never* wash my feet,” he is literally saying, “*By no means* will you [ever] wash my feet *unto eternity*” (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα – *eis ton aiona*). This phrase “serves to make even more emphatic this denial.”³⁹ Jesus’ reply to Peter’s rejection, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me,” let him know that “footwashing is not optional, and that it has far-reaching significance,”⁴⁰ since it involves sharing (μέρος - *meros*) with him. Thomas states,

One of the first things the implied reader must see in μέρος [*meros*] with Jesus is a share in eternal life . . . This interpretation is supported by the many New Testament texts where μέρος appears in contexts which deal with issues of eternal life and eternal punishment (cf. Mt. 24:51; Rev. 20:6; 21:8; 22:19). Therefore, it seems safe to assume that one idea conveyed by μέρος with Jesus in John 13:8 is eternal life.⁴¹

³⁹ Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*, 92

⁴⁰ Thomas, 92.

⁴¹ Thomas, 93.

Raymond E. Brown points out μέρος can mean much more than simply having a share in, or fellowship with someone. In the LXX (Nu. 18:20⁴²; Dt. 12:12, 14:27) , μέρος is the translation of the Hebrew *heleq*, which Brown explains,

Describes the God-given heritage of Israel When the hopes of Israel turned to an afterlife, the ‘share’ or ‘heritage’ of God’s people was pictured in heavenly terms.⁴³

Craig S. Keener states that Jesus’ response to Peter is basically that he will have “no share in eternal fellowship with him.”⁴⁴

If Peter did not understand what Jesus was doing at that moment, it seems that he understood the meaning of Jesus’ reply, since he did not want to risk his participation with Him. Peter was “willing to accept whatever necessary to have share with Jesus.”⁴⁵ For that reason, he asked Jesus to wash “not his feet only but also his hands and head” (v. 9). Jesus told Peter, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you” (v.10). It is interesting to see that Jesus used two different verbs in His reply to Peter, the verb λούειν (*louein*), normally used for the complete cleansing of the body, in the sense “to wash,” “to bathe,”⁴⁶ and the verb νίπτο (*nipito*) used for partial cleansing such as washing the face, hands, or feet.⁴⁷ Thomas argues that “it appears that λελουμένος (*leluménos*) most likely has reference to baptism (and Jesus’ death).”⁴⁸ Albrecht Oepke also concurs with this position when he states that “all the relevant passages show that, so far as theological usage is

⁴² “The Lord said to Aaron: You shall have no allotment in their land, nor shall you have any share among them; I am your share and your possession among the Israelites” (Nm. 18:20 NRSV).

⁴³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII–XXI)*. (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1970), 565.

⁴⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. Two, (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, LLC, 2003), 909.

⁴⁵ Keener, 909.

⁴⁶ Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 295.

⁴⁷ Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., 295.

⁴⁸ Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*, 103.

concerned, λούειν (*louíein*) and λουτρόν (*loutrón*) are baptismal terms.⁴⁹ The perfect tense of the verb (λελουμένος *-leluménos-* past action with abiding results) used by Jesus, implies that “there is no reason to repeat the complete bath one has received,” in the same way that “baptism is a rite which is once-and-for-all.”⁵⁰ If Peter has already been cleansed (baptized), he only needs to wash his feet, since having been bathed, he is “entirely or wholly clean” (13:10b). What Peter needs is only a cleansing of post-baptismal sins. In this sense, “footwashing, then is a sign of the continual cleansing available to the believer...it functions as an extension of baptism –just as baptism was the sign of complete cleansing, footwashing is the sign of continual cleansing.”⁵¹ Thomas states that “more than one interpreter has seen in the footwashing an allusion to forgiveness of post-baptismal sin.”⁵² He adds,

Just as a banquet guest would bathe at home and only wash the feet at the house of the host or hostess to remove the dust accumulated on the road, so Peter (the believer) who experiences baptism (which signifies a complete cleansing from sin) does not need to be rebaptized, but undergoes footwashing, which signifies the removal of sin that might accumulate as a result of life in this sinful world. In a sense, footwashing is an extension of baptism, for it signifies the washing away of post-baptism sins in Peter’s (the believer’s) life.⁵³

To Thomas’ argument that footwashing provides a ‘cleansing of post-baptism sins,’ I would like to add Matthias Wenk’s statement that footwashing “is a rite to assure each other cleanness in the presence of God” and that this ordinance “creates a community of people that are equally clean because their purity is not defined in moral terms but in their common encounter with Jesus through the rite performed.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds 303.

⁵⁰ Thomas, 103.

⁵¹ John Christopher Thomas, *Ministry & Theology: Studies for the Church and Its Leaders* (Cleveland, Tn.: Pathway, 1996), 171.

⁵² Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*, 104.

⁵³ Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*, 105, 06.

⁵⁴ Matthias Wenk, “The Church as Sanctified Community” in *Toward a Pentecostal Ecclesiology: The Church and the Fivefold Gospel*, John Christopher Thomas, ed. (Cleveland, TN.: CPT Press, 2010), 131–33.

Spiritual Implications of Footwashing (13:12–20)

After Jesus finished washing the feet of the disciples, He put on His robe, returned to the table, and proceeded to explain to them the deeper meaning of footwashing. This explanation contained a reaffirmation of Jesus not only as Teacher and Lord, but most important as Lord and Teacher, a command for the disciples to wash one another's feet, and a conditioned blessing that they would receive if they "do these things" that they now know.

"Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. ¹⁸ I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, 'The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' ¹⁹ I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. ²⁰ Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me."⁵⁵

Since Jesus knew that His disciples were still perplexed by His action, He proceeded to explain to them the different nature of this kind of footwashing.

First, Jesus reversed the order of the way they called Him, placing Lord before Teacher. It looks like He was trying to emphasize His authority as God's Son to do what He did and to command what He is about to command. Throughout John's Gospel we see that Jesus establishes His identity as the 'I am,' determining His deity.

In second place, Jesus commands them to "wash one another's feet" based on the example set by Him, who was their Lord and Teacher. Thomas states that 'footwashing is far more than an example. It is a definite prototype.'⁵⁶ The disciples were given the prototype, followed by a command to do exactly as Jesus had done. The fact that Jesus used the verb *opheilo* when he

⁵⁵ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Jn 13:12–20.

⁵⁶ Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*, 110.

commanded the disciples to wash one another's feet, is an indication that he was intentional, deliberate and emphatic in His desire for them to do as He had done. This verb means "to owe someone something" and "to be under obligation,"⁵⁷ and it is used to "describe the mandatory nature of moral conduct (1 Jn 2.6) and Christian service to other brothers and sisters."⁵⁸ It seems that the optional aspect of choosing doing it or not is left out.

In third place, Jesus talks about the equality between servants and master and messengers and the one who sent them. What Jesus is doing, is inverting the roles of himself and the disciples in a society where disciples would never claim to be greater than their teacher.⁵⁹ Keener affirms that "disciples would do for their teachers almost anything a slave would do except deal with their feet, which was considered too demeaning for a free person."⁶⁰ No wonder why the disciples, and mainly Peter, were so scandalized with Jesus' action. He took the place of a slave to wash their feet. Since He was Lord and Teacher giving the example, they were expected to do likewise. Jesus gave them a practical lesson on humility and servanthood.

In fourth place, Jesus told them "If you know⁶¹ these things, you are blessed if you do⁶² them" (v.17). Jesus was holding them accountable to their Jewish ethics, explicitly, "that behavior should correspond to knowledge,"⁶³ as James also requires: "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (James 1:22 NRSV). Was Jesus here only talking about the disciples' knowledge about Him being Lord and Teacher, or about them knowing about footwashing and practicing it? It looks like this statement from Jesus reinforces what He said

⁵⁷ TDNT Volume 5, 559.

⁵⁸ Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*, 109.

⁵⁹ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 911.

⁶⁰ Keener, 911.

⁶¹ οἶδα, "to comprehend the meaning of something, with focus upon the resulting knowledge— 'to understand, to comprehend,'" (Louw Nida 32.4).

⁶² ποιέω, "a marker of an agent relation with a numerable event—'to do, to perform, to practice, to make.'" (Louw Nida 90.45).

⁶³ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 912.

before: “For I have set you and example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (v. 15). If they do what they already know, they will be blessed, a blessing that is given in the form of a beatitude and that is conditioned to the doing, after knowing. The spiritual blessing of washing one another’s feet is a continued fellowship with Jesus not only here but throughout eternity.

Conclusion

As we have learned from our forefathers, their primary motivation for washing the feet of the saints was because it was a New Testament teaching, instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ. Like them, we must also be willing to continue with the observance of this practice, believing Jesus’ promise given in the form of a beatitude that “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

Contrary to the Graeco-Roman world, footwashing by the disciples wasn’t a sign of subjugation, or superiority of one over the other. It was a sign of equality, not seen before in this world. It was a sign of equality between servants and master, messenger and the one who sends the messenger (v.16). Footwashing was a ceremony that showed mutual submission, produced by love as equals in the Lord.

When observing footwashing, we must avoid a legalistic or judgmental spirit. A spirit of love, respect, auto submission must prevail, as we endeavor to obey Jesus’ commandment to wash one another’s feet, remembering the blessing: “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (v. 17).

Footwashing not only provides fellowship with Christ and with one another, but also a symbol of continued cleansing from sin, so that we can bear fruit and remain in Him (John 15). Thomas adds:

Footwashing signifies the disciple’s spiritual cleansing for a continued relationship with Jesus. As such, the footwashing functions as an extension of

the disciple's baptism in that it signifies continual cleansing from the sin acquired (after baptism) through life in a sinful world.⁶⁴

One great blessing of footwashing in the words of Matthias Wenk is that it,

Creates a community of people that are equally clean because their purity is not defined in moral terms, but in their common encounter with Jesus through the rite performed.⁶⁵

Footwashing should be an ongoing ritual. It is not optional and we should practice it as often as possible. Regarding the continuous practice of footwashing, Frank D. Macchia states:

...the fact that Jesus instructs the disciples to wash each other's feet, introduces the rite as an ongoing ritual in the church that would convey the full meaning of Jesus' initial act of footwashing after the crucifixion and resurrection have occurred. The fact that Peter could have no part in Christ without the footwashing (v. 8) revealed that this rite was not an option that the church could do without.⁶⁶

Having stated our preceding thoughts, we proceed with the following recommendations:

1. We reaffirm the practice of the Ordinance of Footwashing as taught and commanded by Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.
2. We recommend that it be observed as often as possible, whether after Communion or at a separate time.
3. We recommend it to be observed in a spirit of humility and love toward one another.
4. We recommend that this updated version of the doctrine of footwashing be taught to the members of the Church of God of Prophecy.

⁶⁴ Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13*, 150.

⁶⁵ Matthias Wenk, "The Church as Sanctified Community," in *Toward a Pentecostal Ecclesiology: The Church and the Fivefold Gospel*, John Christopher Thomas, ed. (Cleveland, TN: CPT, 2010), 131–32.

⁶⁶ Frank D. Macchia, "Is Footwashing the Neglected Sacrament? A Theological Response to John Christopher Thomas," *Pneuma* 19 (1997), 241.

Respectfully and humbly submitted,

Biblical Doctrine and Polity Committee:

Philip A. Pruitt, Chairman

Elías Rodríguez, Secretary

Delroy Hall

Tim Harper

James Kolawole

Sonia Martin

Nelson Joel Torres