Embodied Forgiveness: Yoder and the (Body) Politics of Footwashing

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Abstract: The writings of churchman and ethicist John Howard Yoder played an enormous role in shaping the ethical and theological vision of his denomination beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century. While his writings on politics and theological ethics are well-known and widely quoted in the academic circles of his denomination, Yoder also wrote and published about liturgy, focusing especially on the social impact of worship practices. However, Yoder demonstrated a curious lack of interest in an Anabaptist ritual with a long and deep tradition—footwashing. After recounting briefly the history of footwashing among Anabaptist groups, this paper presents data from a survey on current footwashing rates in the (Old) Mennonite Church that confirm a suspected decline in footwashing participation in Yoder's home denomination. An examination of Yoder's writings on liturgy follows, with the goal of trying to better understand Yoder's virtual silence on the ritual practice of footwashing. The paper closes with a critical assessment of Yoder's casting of religious ritual as a "detour" leading away from genuine practice and faithful witness.

One of the oldest religious rituals associated with Anabaptists is that of footwashing. A deeply physical and intimately interactive practice, footwashing has waxed and waned among Anabaptist groups since the beginning. But many traditionalist groups—among them the Amish since the seventeenth century and the Mennonite Church (the "Old" branch) before the 1970s—have understood the practice to be an important part of the celebration of communion as well as a nonnegotiable element in a deeply embodied Anabaptist disposition of obedient, forgiving humility. More recently, anecdotal evidence of a decline in footwashing among Anabaptist groups has coincided with skepticism toward the practice as some Mennonite academics and pastors have sought to replace this longstanding ritual with more "culturally relevant" and practical forms of humble service. The move from ritual practice to "real-life" ethical action represents a Yoderian

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skepticism toward Christian rituals whose sociopolitical efficacy cannot be easily demonstrated. This paper explores the reasons for that disfavor by examining the work of John Howard Yoder, especially his understanding of the role of sacramental practices such as "confronting and forgiving." Far from being an anachronistic custom of irrelevant pietism, footwashing provides Mennonites and other practicing Christian groups with a means of cultivating a particular biblical-ethical identity in which members confront each other in a highly corporeal act of mutually forgiving acceptance.

FOOTWASHING IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL: JOHN 13:1-23

In the thirteenth chapter of the fourth Gospel, Jesus anticipates his arrest and subsequent crucifixion by celebrating an intimate supper with his disciples. In an unexpected act of gracious and salvific service, the Johannine Jesus interrupts the meal, rises from the table, takes off his outer garment and, one by one, washes the feet of his disciples:

> Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 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.[1]

Following this act, Jesus returns to his place at the table and questions his followers in an apparent attempt to offer a framework of meaning for his action.[2]

> Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

In recent history only a tiny minority of Christian traditions have read Jesus' words about doing "as I have done to you" as an injunction calling all followers to imitate Jesus literally through the physical practice of footwashing. Some traditions spiritualize the reading while others, such as Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, have practiced it for

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1. The Bible. New Revised Standard Version. Wayne Meeks, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1989). All future biblical references are taken from N.R.S.V.

2. I am aware of the textual features suggesting a thematic and subjective disjuncture between Jesus' "ritual" washing of Peter in verses 6-11 and the "ceremony" implied in verses 12-20. But in this paper I follow the Anabaptist tradition of treating verses 6-20 as a single text in which Jesus models an act of humility, service and equality and asks his disciples to do the same for each other.

centuries in a symbolic, highly stylized form usually involving only a few leaders or parishioners.[3] Theologian John Christopher Thomas argues that both a careful reading of the Johannine text itself as well as a thorough examination of early church documents leads to the inevitable conclusion that Jesus' early followers most certainly understood him to be calling them to a concrete practice of footwashing.[4] He argues that both the placement and structure of the text as well as the actual wording of the command promote an interpretation that calls for an imitation of Jesus' example as a "prototype" rather than merely a cognitive appreciation of his act as a "moral lesson" in service.[5] Furthermore, ample evidence in a wide array of documents from early sources shows that many in the early Christian tradition made a regular practice of washing feet as a form of obedience to Christ's example.[6]

MENNONITE FOOTWASHING: A BRIEF HISTORY[7]

Mennonites and other Anabaptist groups have been washing feet as a religious ritual since the earliest days of the Radical Reformation. Though the practice probably never enjoyed universal acceptance among all Anabaptists, early radical reformers such as Pilgram Marpeck and Dirk Phillips promoted footwashing as an important religious ordinance, and Menno Simons mentioned the practice in his writings though without referring to it as an ordinance.[8] The *Ausbund*, an early-sixteenth-century Anabaptist hymnal still in use among the Amish today, includes a special twenty-five-stanza hymn to accompany the practice.[9]

Still, although the majority of significant Anabaptist-Mennonite confessions of faith mention or mandate the practice,[10] many traditions, such as the Swiss Brethren, may never have practiced it in Europe. In the

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3. Herbert Thurston, "Washing of Feet and Hands," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913).

4. J. C. Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

5. J. C. Thomas, "Footwashing within the context of the Lord's Supper" (presentation, delivered in 2005), http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/node/320 (accessed Dec. 5, 2006).

6. J. C. Thomas, "Footwashing within the Context of the Lord's Supper," *The Lord's Supper: Believers' Church Perspectives,* ed. Dale Stoffer (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1997), 169-184.

7. I am grateful to David Swartz for lending me his research notes on Mennonites and footwashing in the early twentieth century.

8. Harold S. Bender, "Footwashing," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 2:348.

9. Ibid.

10. Nekeisha Alexis-Baker, "The Towel and the Basin: Symbols of a Lost Ordinance," unpublished paper (Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries Archive, 2006).

earliest days of Anabaptism, footwashing seems to have been more common among the congregations in Holland than those in Switzerland and Southern Germany.[11] In both Europe and North America it has typically been the more conservative, traditionalist groups that have cultivated the practice. For both the Amish in Alsace[12] and the Mennonite Brethren in Russia,[13] footwashing represented a fundamental means of distinguishing themselves from other local Mennonites while demonstrating their own fidelity to the Bible. Since most of the Anabaptist immigrants to North America came from more conservative European groups fleeing religious persecution, the practice of footwashing was more common among North American immigrants than the generally more acculturated groups who stayed behind in Europe.[14]

Among North American Anabaptists, footwashing was important in Amish congregations, and among the Mennonites of Lancaster County during the eighteenth century.[15] By the end of the nineteenth century the practice was nearly universal among Mennonites. In a 1954 study, Clarence Hiebert named three key elements contributing to the adoption of footwashing among Mennonites in North America: 1) interaction with the Amish; 2) conservative Flemish Mennonites who migrated to America, first from Northern Germany and Holland, and later from Russia; and 3) the widespread use of the Dordrecht Confession, which advocates the practice unequivocally. Hiebert also pointed out that even though the Swiss Brethren did not practice footwashing in Europe, the influence of Dordrecht and their interaction with other Anabaptist groups led their descendents to become some of the most ardent supporters of the practice in North America. Though select regional conferences such as Franconia held out against making the practice of footwashing a requirement, the practice of footwashing came to be established during the nineteenth century as a key element of liturgy in the congregations that would make up the (Old) Mennonite Church with the Franconia conference falling into line by making the practice a requirement around the beginning of the twentieth century.[16] Many of

11. Bender, "Footwashing," 348.

12. Milton Gascho, "The Amish Division of 1693-1697 in Switzerland and Alsace," *MQR* 5 (Oct. 1937), 235-266.

13. Theron Schlabach, *Peace, Faith Nation: Mennonites and Amish in 19th Century America* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1989), 238.

14. Clarence R. Hiebert, "The History of the Ordinance of Feetwashing in the Mennonite Churches" (M.A. Thesis, Biblical Seminary in New York, 1954), 84.

15. Richard K. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America 1683-1790* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1985), 195.

16. Beulah Stauffer Hostetler, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements: A Community Paradigm* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 93.

the congregations of the General Conference Mennonites also practiced footwashing during the first half of the twentieth century, but only a minority of congregations required it.[17]

Why was footwashing so important to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition? One reason had to do with the integral part footwashing played in the practical exercise of the ban. In the Amish and (Old) Mennonite traditions that later formed the Mennonite Church footwashing was tied to a semi-annual practice of communion that provided the occasion for communal- and self-examination with the intent of confronting members with sin in their lives and the possibility of excluding them from taking the Lord's Supper.[18] By way of a two- or three-week process—including a council meeting, a preparatory service and, if necessary, special visits by the bishop to wayward members—communion provided leaders with both the authority and the occasion for a practical exercise of "binding and loosing." Only members in good standing who pronounced some version of the statement "I am at peace with God and my fellow man [sic]"[19] were permitted to participate in the communion ritual that closed with footwashing.[20]

For many of the leaders in this tradition, footwashing symbolized several ideals at the heart of the tradition. In theological terms, it provided an opportunity par excellence for embodying the ethic of *Gelassenheit* or "yieldedness" to God's will and abandonment of self, a formative ideal in the Amish Mennonite tradition.[21] The prolific early-

17. S. F. Pannabecker, "The Development of the General Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America in the American Environment," (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1914), 83.

18. Robert Brenneman, David Swartz and Lisa Weaver Swartz, "When the Saints Go Washing: Footwashing and the Privatization of Mennonite Bodies," presentation at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (Tampa, Fla., 2007), 1. Though most (Old) Mennonite Church congregations have abandoned the council meeting, a handful of rural Pennsylvania congregations belonging to the Mennonite Church USA continue the practice along with a preparatory service in some form. While the possibility of being kept from communion remains, our interviews with pastors of these congregations suggest that the onus of examination during the preparatory time falls on the individual believer who is encouraged toward introspection and self-examination.

19. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood*, 196. The use of this phrase or a similar one in a German dialect was common already in Lancaster County congregations in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries and continued to be used in Amish Mennonite congregations around the middle of the twentieth century.

20. It is certainly true that the potential for withholding communion from members has provided ministers and bishops with the opportunity to abuse power or practice legalism, or both. I mention the council meeting and preparatory service here only as a means of placing the early-twentieth-century practice of footwashing in its liturgical context.

21. Paton Yoder, *Tradition and Transition* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 81.

twentieth-century churchman Daniel Kauffman used the emerging conference paper, *Gospel Herald*, to argue vigorously for the practice because, he wrote, "It typifies beautifully and forcefully the principle of humility and brotherly equality."[22] For Kauffman, the ritual was a crucial component of a set of Christian practices making up a "seamless whole." If footwashing were compromised, he argued, "soon all the Bible ordinances and restrictions that call for self-denial [find] their way out at the same door."[23] Nor did the status of footwashing change dramatically in the Mennonite Church during the first half of the twentieth century. By the time of the compiling of *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* in the 1950s, Mennonite historian and churchman Harold S. Bender could write, "There is universal observance of the ordinance of footwashing" in the Mennonite Church.[24]

Thus, at the middle of the twentieth century, the denomination in which theologian and ethicist John Howard Yoder came of age gave great prominence to embodied ritual practices and the role of physical bodies in the gathered church.[25] Even as late as the 1960s, the Mennonite Confession of Faith, in a section entitled "Ceremonies and Practices," made explicit reference to the embodied nature of six of eight ordinances deemed crucial to the practice of true faith, including instructions regarding the presentation of physical bodies within the gathered (social) body.[26] Believers, for example, were instructed in how to treat the bodies of new members (dousing them with the water of baptism), how to cover female bodies (with a prayer veiling), what to do with sick bodies (anoint them with oil), how to ordain a body (by laying hands on it), and how redeemed bodies were to greet (by the holy kiss) and serve each other (by washing feet).[27] Only in the Lord's Supper and marriage was the role of the physical body less than overtly clear.

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22. Daniel Kauffman, *Gospel Herald*, Dec. 3, 1914.

23. Daniel Kauffman, *A Manual of Bible Doctrines* (Elkhart, Ind.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1898), 116.

24. Harold S. Bender, "Mennonite Church," *ME* 3:615. Note that Bender is referring here only to the (Old) Mennonite Church tradition.

25. Julia Kasdorf, "Bahktin, Boundaries and Bodies," *MQR* 71 (July 1997), 169. Kasdorf's observation that conservative Mennonite faith of the middle of the century was deeply embodied is borne out by her recollection of the embodied nature of the communion service at the Locust Grove, Pa., congregation in the early 1970s. That she makes no reference to the footwashing service or the separation of the sexes practiced during the ritual in that congregation is somewhat perplexing since it would add considerable weight and nuance to her overall case.

26. Harold Bauman, chair of the committee responsible for drafting the 1963 confession, recalled in a recent interview that the first draft of the confession included only two ordinances—baptism and communion. So strong was the negative reaction from pastors that the committee was forced to insert the other five in the final draft.

27. "Mennonite Confession of Faith, 1963," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia*

The ordinance language emphasizing literal obedience to Scripture and the enacting of peculiarly embodied religious rituals must have fallen hard on the ears of a new generation of educated, socially mobile Mennonite leaders and professionals. That footwashing was included as an ordinance associated with coverings, cape dresses and disciplinary visits from the bishop probably undermined its popularity among younger Mennonites. Harold Bauman, an elder statesman of the Mennonite Church whose historical memory extends to the 1940s, remembers early changes in footwashing taking place in and around College Mennonite Church (Goshen, IN) in the 1950's.

> In the 1950s there began to be some changes because I think at least two things were happening. One was people were becoming a bit more sophisticated and the second was that we were being introduced to other ways of interpreting Scripture. So [footwashing] came to be seen as for that day—a cultural event."

According to Bauman, increasing levels of education made urban and suburban Mennonites both more critical of traditional ordinance language—and the literal readings of scripture that went with it—and more interested in ritual "innovation."

PERSISTENCE AMID DECLINE: FOOTWASHING IN MENNONITE CHURCHES TODAY

While this paper does not seek to provide a full discussion of the current state of footwashing in all Mennonite churches today, a brief appraisal of the present shape of the practice, based on a recent empirical study, suggests the outlines of attitudes and practices regarding footwashing in the congregations of the (Old) Mennonite Church tradition.[28] Focusing on the tradition that ostensibly practiced footwashing "universally," we surmised, would allow us to compare current practices with an earlier baseline and give us the best sense for how, if at all, the practice has changed in recent decades.

The project involved a survey of a representative sample of congregations (N=117) in the (Old) Mennonite Church tradition—the larger of two denominations which merged in 2001 to form the Mennonite Church USA. [29] A short questionnaire composed of thirteen

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Online, www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M4663.html (accessed Mar. 7, 2008).

28. Brenneman, Swartz and Swartz, "When the Saints Go Washing."

29. Our decision to limit the survey to congregations in the U.S. (Old) Mennonite Church tradition was simply a result of limited budgets and a desire to have a baseline of traditional practice with which to compare the current practice.

questions regarding communion and footwashing practices was sent to 163 congregations during 2007 and 2008.[30] Congregational representatives were given the option of answering by e-mail or via an enclosed hard copy. Nonresponders were telephoned in an attempt to achieve the highest response ratio possible. One hundred seventeen congregational representatives responded via e-mail or post, or agreed to a telephone interview, giving the project a response rate of 72 percent. Because the overall sample size is not large (with a margin of error of 9 percent), results should not be read as a means of pinpointing the exact proportion of footwashing congregations but rather as suggestive of broad trends in practice within the tradition.[31]

Some scholars have stated that footwashing in Mennonite congregations underwent a dramatic decline in the second half of the twentieth century.[32] Anecdotal evidence to support such a claim abounds, but until now no data have been available to verify that claim or to examine it more closely. We were surprised to find that the overwhelming majority of (Old) Mennonite congregations continue to hold footwashing services. Eighty percent of the congregations in our sample hold a footwashing service at least once a year. Of the ninety-four congregations in the sample that held a service during the past year, forty-six held services in the traditional semi-annual fashion (39 percent) while five (4 percent) held services *more* than twice a year. Forty-three congregations (37 percent) hold only one service a year, usually on Maundy Thursday, and twenty-three congregations (20 percent) rarely hold footwashing services or never do so. Thus if we look merely at footwashing services, it would appear that Mennonite Church footwashing has diminished only slightly since Bender's claim of "universal" practice at mid-century.

Holding a service, of course, does not indicate participation of all or even a majority of members. We therefore asked congregational representatives to estimate the number of participants who actually took part in the last service. We found that while most Mennonite congregations *offer* footwashing, only a minority of the Mennonites

30. An identical survey was sent on two occasions, in early 2007 and early 2008. The second, larger "wave" was sent due to our acquisition of modest funding from the Center for the Study of Religion and Society, directed by Christian Smith at the University of Notre Dame.

31. It is unfortunate that none of the large, well-funded surveys conducted on Mennonites in 1972, 1989 and 2006 include data on footwashing. Indeed, it was the disattention to embodied religious practices in those studies that motivated us to undertake our own study of footwashing and communion.

32. See, for example, Keith Graber Miller, "Mennonite Footwashing: Identity Reflections and Altered Meanings," *Worship* (March 1992), 148-170; J. C. Wenger, *What Mennonites Believe* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1991).

surveyed—roughly 39 percent—actually wash the feet of another member in a given year. The main reason for this decline in practice appears to be that pastors try to accommodate a reluctance to participate among members. Worried that younger members or new members feel uncomfortable with the rite, many pastors have moved the footwashing service from its more traditional positioning within the Lord's Supper celebration on Sunday morning to an evening service or another less conspicuous moment in the liturgy. A few pastors even provide a benediction following the communion celebration so that "younger members" can easily exit before the footwashing takes place. In this way they make footwashing an option easily passed over by those who choose not to participate.

Thus, the decline in footwashing is most apparent not in official footwashing services but in the change of format allowing many members to opt out of the ritual while still partaking in the Lord's Supper. Interestingly, "Mennonite ethnicity" or having a high proportion of "cradle Mennonites" in a congregation is not closely correlated to a congregation's rate of practice or participation in footwashing. Though "multiethnic" congregations are indeed less likely to hold footwashing services, two-thirds hold such services at least annually and many do so with at least as much enthusiasm as many "Anglo" Mennonite congregations. In fact, the three congregations in our survey with the highest frequency of footwashing services, at four services a year, are Hispanic congregations in New York City, New Jersey and Texas. In these congregations pastors report high levels of participation and enthusiasm even when the minister and many of the members had not practiced the ritual before arriving as adults in a Mennonite congregation. Meanwhile some "cradle Mennonite" congregations have recently moved their footwashing service to a weeknight, drastically reducing participation. It appears, then, that the ebbing of participation rates cannot be attributed merely to increased pluralism within the denomination.

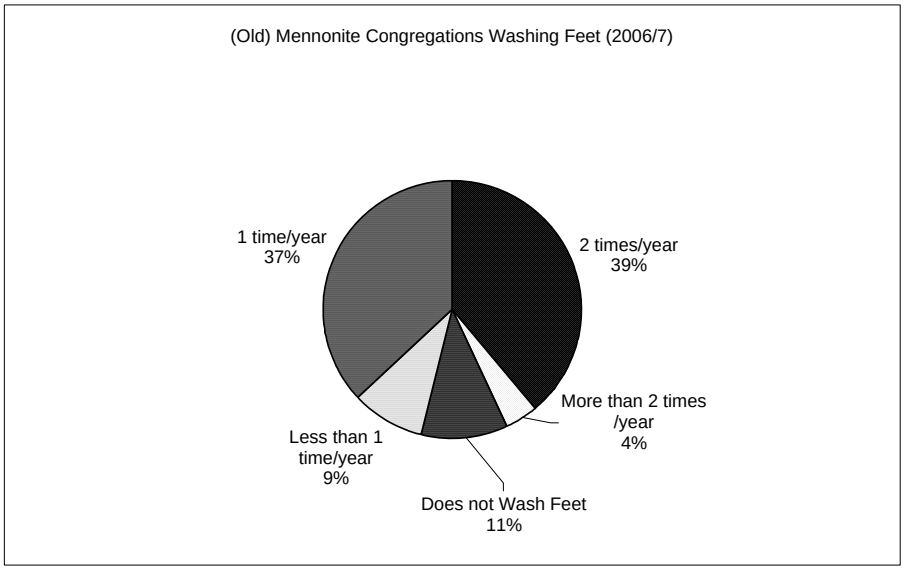

Figure 1. Frequency of Footwashing Services in (Old) Mennonite Congregations

While such a cursory overview of the current state of footwashing in (Old) Mennonite congregations barely scratches the surface regarding the why's and wherefore's of changes in the practice, it does establish that participation in footwashing declined noticeably in Mennonite congregations during the second half of the twentieth century.[33]

FOOTWASHING AND THE WORK OF JOHN HOWARD YODER

Without a doubt the most prominent voice in Mennonite theology and ethics in the twentieth century was that of John Howard Yoder.[34] In dozens of books, articles and unpublished presentations Yoder provided both a compelling raison d'etre for the particularism embodied by the Anabaptist-Mennonite community of which he was a part even while he mapped out a framework for the careful articulation of distinctive

33. While we cannot pinpoint when all of the changes took place, many congregations stopped practicing footwashing in the 1980s and 1990s. Only a few changed or dropped the practice since Yoder's passing in 1997.

34. Stanley Hauerwas, "Introduction: Lingering with Yoder's Wild Work," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia Press, 2004), 18.

Mennonite commitments such as nonviolence and fraternal admonition. Prominent in his early writings was a hermeneutical perspective he called "biblical realism." "Biblical realists," claimed Yoder, read the Bible in a "straightforward" manner "as texts bearing authority in a believing community."[35] Thus it is a curious fact that Yoder nonetheless made little or no mention of the distinctive Mennonite practice of ritual footwashing.[36] While he did mention the status of Jesus' act of washing his disciple's feet as a "sign," he seemed reluctant to hold up as normative Jesus' invitation to his disciples that they imitate his act. By contrast, Thomas notes, "[I]f the Johannine Jesus had intended to institute footwashing as a continuing religious rite, how else could he have said it to get his point across?"[37]

Indeed, a "straightforward" reading of the John 13 account of the Lord's Supper—one that pays close attention to the social and ethical claims that the text made on the believing community—seems to militate against the kind of abstract spiritualizing or moralizing that extracts Jesus' call to actual practice and relegates it to the language of a symbolic lesson in service and humility. Given Yoder's zeal for pointing out the tendency of mainstream Christianity to ignore the normative, social meaning of the biblical text, especially in Jesus' commands to his disciples in the Gospels, one wonders why Yoder seemed content to leave in peace the majority tradition of reading John 13 as a "parable" rather than a call to practice.

This omission is even more perplexing given Yoder's consistent ecclesiology. First, Yoder promotes a vision for the church as a "visible community" in the world—the bearer of an alternative to power-based traditional models of progressive or conservative religion—rather than a vehicle of social reform or an escapist retreat from the world. As a "living witness," the visible community of believers accepts its particularity and its "marginal" status in the world because of its deep patience—a patience rooted in faith that God can and does use the witness of a seemingly insignificant church to call the world to faith in Jesus and his nonviolent grace. Freed from the need to transform the world through its own reformist measures or by exercising its own political clout, the patient church practices faithfulness by loving and

35. John H. Yoder, *To Hear the Word* (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia Press, 2001), 53.

36. I confess to not having conducted a full-fledged, exhaustive review of every published and unpublished writing of Yoder to verify this claim. But given my discussions with other students and professors, along with my reading of his work especially on worship and ritual, I make the above assertion, ready to recant if proven wrong.

37. Thomas, "Footwashing within the Context of the Lord's Supper."

forgiving its own members as well as outsiders and enemies. In so doing the church shows the world that reconciliation is possible through the transforming power of the cross.[38] Yoder argues that distinctiveness precedes social relevance for the "royal priesthood," which practices "evangelical nonconformity" as it attempts to embody the revolutionary nature of the faithful, reconciling community in a divided, status-driven world. Since Yoder grew up in a Mennonite congregation that practiced the nonconformist oddity of footwashing with particular zeal,[39] and since he attended another congregation as an adult that also retained the practice, his lack of written work on the practice of footwashing seems especially perplexing.

If Yoder had been silent on matters of ritual—if he had, as an ethicist, simply left matters of worship and Christian ritual to those whose areas of expertise compelled them to address liturgy—then his silence on footwashing might have been understandable. But Yoder did indeed speak and write about worship, about ritual and, despite a traditional Mennonite distaste for the word, even about sacraments. In his disarmingly concise volume, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community for a Watching World*, Yoder outlines five practices that, he argues, communicate God's project to the world by embodying the new humanity made possible by the transforming power of the Gospel. For Yoder, the five "visible signs" include fraternal admonition (binding and loosing), breaking bread, baptism into the new humanity, the complementarity of gifts in the "fullness of Christ," and "the rule of Paul" or "decision by means of conversation."[40] Yoder argued that these five "sample practices," all of which are still practiced today but often in lesser degrees due to tradition or compromise, nevertheless embody the coming together of divine and human action, are mandatory in Scripture and must be done in a biblical manner.[41] They are, therefore, *sacraments*.

Yoder's view of sacrament highlights the normative, ethical and political implications of Christian worship. Sacraments do not merely symbolize God's presence in an abstract manner; rather they call the community of faith to live a certain way and in so doing to embody the witness they give. No theoretical bridge is needed to move from "worship" to "practice" or from "sacrament" to ethics.[42] Worship, for

38. John H. Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press, 2002).

39. Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006), 8.

40. John H. Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991), 71.

41. Yoder, *Body Politics*, 44-45.

42. John H. Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand

Yoder, is itself ethical and involves politics, or particular ways of dealing with power and relationships. One wonders, then, why Yoder did not use such a stance as a position from which to argue the importance of footwashing in the believers church. For what other Christian practice melds ritual more smoothly with relationships, or worship with ethics? In the act of footwashing, individual members are forced to confront one another in an intimate way, acknowledging in humility their abandonment of status and their commitment to embrace one another.

So far I have outlined three characteristics of Yoder's thought which would seem to make Yoder a partisan to the footwashing ritual: 1) his perspective of "biblical realism," which assumed "the pastoral priority" of the text as normative for the believing community; 2) his promotion of a "visible community" practicing "evangelical nonconformity" with a "patient" disposition; and 3) his insistence on the ethical-missional nature of sacrament and worship, which both transforms the community and demonstrates Gospel transformation to a watching world.

One even more prominent feature of Yoder's work also relates, albeit in an indirect way, to the practice of footwashing. That is his persistent contention that confronting and forgiving, also known in biblical terminology as "binding and loosing," must be a principal concern of the faith community. In many of his works Yoder made clear his support of the culturally distasteful view that Christians have the right, and indeed bear the duty, to confront one another about sin—and also to seek reconciliation and forgiveness in a personal and, if necessary, public manner.[43] In the modern, individualist West, such a call to believers to involve themselves with the "dirty laundry" of their coreligionists comes closer to cultural "heresy" than perhaps any other noncomformist practice of the church.[44] Yoder argued that Jesus gave authority to his disciples and to all believing Christians to confront one another in love and to seek reconciliation, and he gave them the Holy Spirit empowering them to do just that. Recognizing the controversial nature of his "straightforward" reading of John 20:22-23, Yoder writes, "The prospect of loving frankness, with admonition and forgiveness flowing freely both ways, is threatening by its unfamiliarity. Ours is an age . . . which increases our ability to find ways to avoid such an open meeting of

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Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 361.

43. That Yoder himself submitted, albeit with some protest, to such public ecclesial discipline when neither his livelihood nor his academic reputation depended on submission only underscores his own commitment to the practice.

44. I would argue that confronting and forgiving in North America after World War II is even more "countercultural" than most forms of Christian pacifism.

souls."[45] The scandal of a community of adults, without blood relations, who nevertheless seek to be intimately concerned with the most personal matters of faith and ethics should not be lost on readers.

At first blush, the practices of binding and loosing and of footwashing may seem to bear little resemblance. And yet there are important textual as well as sociological similarities. First, both practices were set forth by Christ in practice and in teaching. Yoder noted in texts such as Matthew 18, Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13 that Jesus calls his disciples to imitate him. Jesus uses similar language in the fourth Gospel when he calls his disciples to imitate his practice of footwashing.

	Binding and Loosing	**Footwashing**
Key Text	As the Father has sent me, so I send you. . . If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. (Jn. 20:19b, 23)	So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (Jn. 13:14-15)
Result	"harmonization" of community (Mt. 18); restoration of offenders	Spiritual cleansing (Jn. 13:8-10); reconciliation; practice of humility and mutuality (Jn. 13:16)

Second, although Jesus does not overtly offer the forgiveness of sins through the washing of feet he does make clear the connection between his action and spiritual cleansing and reconciliation: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me" (Jn. 13:8). A number of Mennonite confessions from Dordrecht to the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective of 1995 have explicitly noted this connection. Dordrecht describes the meaning of footwashing ". . . as a sign of true humility . . . to remember by this feet washing, the true washing, whereby we are washed through His precious blood, and made pure after the soul."[46] Similarly the Confession of 1995, while dodging the matter of the normativity of footwashing, points out the connotation of spiritual cleansing: "Believers who wash each other's feet show that they share in

45. Yoder, *Body Politics*, 6.

46. "Dordrecht Confession of Faith, 1632," quoted in J. C. Wenger, *Introduction to Theology* (Scottdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1954), 382.

the body of Christ. They thus acknowledge their frequent need of cleansing. . . ."[47]

Washing feet is not the same as forgiving sins. And yet there are physical dimensions of footwashing that bear a striking resemblance to the face-to-face encounter in which one member of the believing community can "release" another member through the act of forgiveness. Perhaps it is this resemblance, in addition to the textual implications, that have caused the confessions to attribute to footwashing a kind of cleansing or a bodily act of "forgiving." Footwashing allows Christians to forgive *with their hands* while on their knees. It offers a setting for *embodied* forgiveness. Indeed, it has been the experience of many Christians that the physical act of bending down to touch the feet of another sister or brother forces them to encounter that person in such an intimate way as to make impossible the continuation of strife between them. Eleanor Kreider narrates one such encounter:

> A racially mixed church desired to hold a feet washing service. But one African-American brother protested. "It is not possible for me, for cultural reasons, to do this. It is too difficult, because of the history of my people, to wash the feet of a white man. Please excuse me." Another man, of European descent, nodded his head, hearing and accepting the pain. He said, "That's all right. But will you let me wash your feet anyway?" Neither man was prepared for the powerful effect of this ritual, for the tears that flowed, or for their new inner grasp of the Christian vision of reconciliation across the barriers of human pain.[48]

Clearly not all footwashing encounters involve reconciliation or the forgiveness of old grudges. A lamentable counterpoint to the above story can be found in a statement by the Virginia Conference issued in 1941:

> 3. Salutation and Feetwashing—Keeping in line with our present practice of making a distinction between the sexes in the observance of feetwashing and of the kiss of charity, we do not recommend the practice of these two ordinances between the white and colored.[49]

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47. Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada, "Footwashing," *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Church Canada, 1995). *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, www.gameo.org/encyclopedia-/contents/C6652_1995.html (accessed Mar. 9, 2008).

48. Eleanor Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1997), 159.

49. Quoted in Hiebert, "The History of the Ordinance of Feetwashing," 84. A former member of a Mennonite congregation in Meridian, Miss., recalled that footwashing was dropped when African-Americans began attending regular services in the 1960s.

That interracial footwashing was frowned upon in the Mennonite South only underscores the potential for this ritual to incite reconciliation. By its very intimate, embodied nature, footwashing makes the persistence of grudges and personal, even social, enmity all the more difficult and provides the setting for individual believers to face each other—indeed, to touch each other's exposed bodies—in ways that can powerfully enable honesty and embody equality.[50] The semi-random nature in which footwashing partners are selected in many traditional Mennonite footwashing services only further elevates the probability that forgiving encounters will happen.

YODER AGAINST FOOTWASHING: PRACTICE VS. "RITUAL SCREEN"

While certain aspects of Yoder's writings provide theological support for the continuing practice of literal footwashing in the faith community, other features of his work help to explain his virtual silence on the matter. First, as noted earlier, while Yoder underscored the importance of Christian practices or sacraments, he framed their importance in terms mostly limited to their sociological import. Yoder understood sacramental practices first and foremost as "meaning" exactly what they "mean" in everyday life. The Eucharist, for example, means sharing bread and sustenance. In Yoder's words,

> It is not the case, as far as New Testament accounts are concerned, that, in an act of "institution" or symbol making, God or the church would have said "let bread stand for daily sustenance." . . . It is that bread is daily sustenance. Bread eaten together *is* economic sharing. Not merely symbolically but in actual fact it extends to a wider circle the economic solidarity that normally is obtained in the family.[51]

Given such a view of sacrament as an act with everyday social significance rather than a purely symbolic meaning, it is understandable that Yoder would have been less enthusiastic about the modern-day continuation of the footwashing rite in faith communities. Next to the very common, everyday act of eating or "sharing bread," the act of washing feet might appear like a dusty holdover from another time and culture. What is the everyday, sociological meaning of such an outmoded act?[52] Perhaps such a perspective explains why, in a rare

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50. Recent survey research indicates that the only context in which the holy kiss is still practiced in mainstream Mennonite congregations is immediately following the washing of feet and usually among older members. Congregations that do not wash feet have also completely dropped the holy kiss.

51. Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood*, 365.

52. Yoder provides no explanation for why he chooses to emphasize in Eucharist the

moment in which he addresses the significance of Jesus' act in John 13, Yoder moved immediately from Jesus' example to the church's re-interpretation of it in symbolic rather than literal fashion:

> When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples he made no abiding contribution to the hygiene of Palestine. Nevertheless, this act took a position in the world that has in itself both spiritual and ethical value. Similarly, when Christians devote themselves to the care of the seriously ill, of the mentally retarded, of the unproductive aged, the fruitfulness of this service cannot be measured by any statistical index of economic efficacy. . . The meaning of this deed is what it signifies, the reality for which it is *the sign*, namely, that this man is here to be the servant of his neighbor.[53]

There is a marked contrast between the symbolic "sign-only" understanding of footwashing proposed above and the "bread-is-sustenance" perspective on Eucharist. Yoder implies here that while Jesus' act of washing the feet of his disciples may have had mostly symbolic meaning, its appropriation by his disciples and the church ought to have both symbolic meaning and immediate social-ethical impact. Such a view is surely shared by many in the church today. Mennonite ethicist Keith Graber Miller found similar attitudes in his study of footwashing in the late 1980s. "One Mennonite voluntary service worker put it, 'Why should we practice this ritual? Service is what we're doing every day.'"[54] A pastor of a congregation in our 2007 survey reported many members were growing uncomfortable with the ritual and that in any case, "We are moving from the practice to practicing the principle." This diminished view of ritual footwashing seems to flow naturally from the emphasis on the social-ethical importance of sacramental practices in which traditional rituals become virtually interchangeable with, or even secondary to, the ethical acts they "signify." As Yoder said, "Baptism is one of those signs [of the new world] and so is open housing. Eucharist is one but so is feeding the hungry. One is not more 'real presence' than the other."[55] When Mennonite congregations today promote car-washes, shoe-shining or trading chores instead of washing feet, they are following Yoder's lead in placing social-ethical "relevancy" above ritual in a way that would

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"concrete" meaning of sharing bread while mostly ignoring the same "concrete" meaning for baptism (washing or bathing), preferring to emphasize instead baptism's "social-functional" meaning as "induction into the community."

53. Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood*, 204.

54. Miller, "Mennonite Footwashing," 148-170.

55. Yoder, *Body Politics*, 27.

certainly have seemed cavalier to the Mennonite leaders who framed footwashing as simple obedience to a straightforward biblical command.[56]

Yoder's emphasis on the social-ethical preeminence of sacramental practices must also be viewed alongside his underlying wariness, if not outright mistrust, of Christian "ritual." For Yoder, to the extent that certain practices of the early church become codified and standardized—made into "rituals"—they lose much of their original power and meaning. In *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* he contends that when, after Constantine, the church lost its visible character as a community set-apart, pointing toward the new reality of Christ's kingdom, it also lost its ability to "signify" and embody Christ's reign and opted instead for the least-common-denominator approach to Christian faithfulness. The "ritualization" of sacraments smoothed this transition since it occurred at the same time as the emergence of a priestly class, capable of controlling and extending grace and the sacred.[57] Thus the Christian practices of baptism and eucharist were codified and anesthetized for use as a kind of spiritual dole to be offered by big government religion. For Yoder, post-Constantinian ritual provided a kind of "screen"[58] or "detour"[59] that kept Christian communities from the real ethical-missional impact embodied in the original sacramental practices. In the context of the contemporary practice of footwashing, Yoder's professed disdain for ritual—by which he meant those sacramental practices that had lost their concrete everyday character—matters because footwashing today bears the marks of a ritual in just that sense, for it is an act that takes on special meaning for a particular group of people in a particular context.

ENGAGING YODER'S SKEPTICISM: FOOTWASHING AS FORMATIVE RITUAL

Yoder firmly believed in the sociological significance of sacramental Christian practices. "To study [sacraments and practices] is not the domain of semantics, aesthetics or dogmatics but of sociology."[60] But Yoder took little time to explore in any depth the actual sociological

56. It appears that creative alternatives to the footwashing ritual are not so commonly practiced as they are suggested. Of fifty-two congregations in the M.C. tradition that were surveyed recently, none were currently practicing such versions of footwashing though a few had tried them in the past.

57. John H. Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003) 109.

58. Ibid., 109.

59. Yoder, *Body Politics*, 27.

60. Ibid., 44.

"impact" of sacramental practices—especially those with forms that had become hardened and "ritualized."[61] The sociology of religion maintains a deep tradition of analyzing religious practices—especially rituals—as the social bedrock of a community and the individuals who belong to it. A century ago the French sociologist Emile Durkheim explored the powerful impact of religious ritual in the formation of the social fabric. Far from viewing religious ritual as an ossification of what was once meaningful action, Durkheim noted the ability of ritual to give shape to a group of individuals by offering them a shared identity formed by the community's relation to things sacred and profane. Thus he argued that rituals "remake individuals and groups morally."[62] Contemporary sociologist Randall Collins describes this process in more detail by developing the concept of "emotional energy" to depict the powerful leverage offered by rituals that in turn promotes "underlying emotional states" that give rise to particular modes of morality and personality.[63]

Viewed through the lens of sociology, footwashing takes on a vastly more important role than simply an antiquated rite tied to an over-literal interpretation of Scripture. For the practicing community of faith, ritual footwashing forms and re-forms community and character in dynamic and powerful ways. First, it offers an important resource for the formation of a particular identity. A community that engages in literal footwashing stands apart from the rest of Christendom that chooses to limit the observance of the Lord's Supper to the more hygienic eucharistic institutions found in the synoptic accounts. The early Anabaptists knew that footwashing made them religious oddballs—indeed, they openly emphasized the uniqueness of their practice among their contemporaries.[64] Yet this formative role of ritual does not rely on overt cognition. This fact is borne out by a study of Weaverland Old Order Mennonites done by sociologist Daniel Lee. Observing that his interviewees expressed a widely diverging array of rationales for footwashing when asked to explain the basis of their commitment to the rite, Lee concluded that "individuals are united in a community because they share signs and rituals, but they may share these things without

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61. One could argue that it was not really the "sociological" but the political impact that Yoder was interested in since a serious sociological analysis would examine the impact of a given sacrament on both the individual and the social fabric in which she is embedded.

62. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religion*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Free Press, 1965 [1903]), 374.

63. Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2004), 65.

64. Bender, "Footwashing," 348.

sharing their meanings."[65] Even if Lee is correct in his contention that the Old Order Mennonites do not share a unified "understanding" of their practice—though they likely understood more than they were able to cogently articulate in an interview—the shared identity derived from their practice of footwashing is no small outcome. For such groups to say in effect, "We are the Christians who wash one another's feet," is itself a statement filled with both theological *and* sociological meaning.

Yoder himself would not have been impressed by such observations since he opposed attempts to underscore the formative usefulness of sacrament or worship for the individual or community. And yet such sociological footnotes are not completely at odds with the observation of one of Yoder's theological heirs, Stanley Hauerwas, whose understanding of liturgy as part of the "performance" of faith gives far more prominence to the formative nature of Christian liturgy: "It is from the essential practices of a community, practices that name the ongoing habits that make it possible for the community to sustain a history, that liturgy forms and reforms our lives."[66] His observation approaches a theological restatement of Durkheim's sociological argument. Rituals do more than strengthen in-group identity through comparison with an out-group. They shape the identity of participants in particular ways. Through their use of symbols and by their construction of the sacred and profane, they elevate some values over others and thus provide a moral framework for "right living."

Footwashing, then, provides a model for relationships that are good and virtuous. It does so through particular actions that are thoroughly embedded in the body and in bodily interaction with the "other"—interaction that is both sentient and personal. Indeed, the deeply physical nature of the footwashing ritual sets it apart from most other sacramental practices. Whereas the practice of "bread breaking" has been highly susceptible to the standardization and "anesthetization" that Yoder so opposed, footwashing by its very nature remains difficult to domesticate.[67] The very intimate nature of the encounter with the "other" required in the physical act of footwashing puts flesh and blood on the Christian call to reconciliation by providing a regular setting in which a deeply personal and intimate encounter with other members of the community becomes difficult to avoid.

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65. Daniel B. Lee, *Old Order Mennonites: Rituals, Beliefs and Community* (Chicago: Burnham, 2000), 151.

66. Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2004), 156.

67. Peter Blum makes a persuasive case for the near-universal equation of feet with dirt and the mundane in "Heidegger's Shoes and Beautiful Feet: Ritual Meaning and Cultural Portability," *MQR* 79 (Jan. 2005), 104.

Perhaps it was, after all, the very embodied nature of the footwashing ritual that made it so easy for Yoder and many contemporary Mennonites to disregard it. Academic Mennonites such as Yoder were very appreciative of the symbolic value of footwashing when promoted as a lesson in service and humility, but they have been glad to leave it at that—a thought-provoking symbol useful for reflection, rather than an act of humble obedience to a command or a channel through which believers experience reconciling grace. It should come as no surprise then that Yoder, while espousing the "sign" of footwashing, did not protest as the practice ebbed during his lifetime, perhaps in part because he saw the physical body as a not entirely important element in the Christian community. Yoder was deeply committed to the use of straightforward logic in uncovering and teaching the principles for Christian ethics. Indeed, as ethicist Michael Cartwright has pointed out, there is a certain kind of rationalism in Yoder's view of liturgy—not Cartesian foundationalism to be sure, but an intellectualism nevertheless that casts the primary effect of the sacraments as instruction of the intellect.[68] Paul Doerksen notes that Yoder is uncomfortable with rituals in part because their embodied nature threatens to shape behavior in a pre- or infra-cognitive manner.[69] And Mennonite theologian Stephen Dintaman levels a similar critique, arguing that Yoder's writings on worship overemphasize "witness for a watching world" while giving short shrift to "human subjectivity" and "how the person hears, experiences and appropriates the community's language of faith."[70] That ritual footwashing can and does communicate powerfully *within* the body (both physically and figuratively via the social body) as both a performance and a subjective experience seems to have been lost amid Yoder's abiding concern with the witness borne by the sacraments.

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68. Michael Cartwright, "Sharing the House of God: Learning to Read Scripture with the Anabaptists," *MQR* 74 (Oct. 2000), 608. Mennonite professor of liturgy Marlene Kropf agrees that Yoder's work was part of a "rationalism" of the 1960s and 1970s which had much to do with changes in footwashing practice. She noted in an interview with the author, "When you abstract the idea from the ritual, then you no longer see the ritual as effective and the formation is supposed to happen cognitively. . . and [the ritual] loses its place in the worship arena"—Interview with author, Dec. 6, 2006.

69. Paul Doerksen, "Share the House: Yoder and Hauerwas among the Nations," *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, ed. Ben Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia, 2004), 193.

70. Stephen Dintaman, "On Flushing the Confessional Rabbit Out of the Socio-Ecclesial Brushpile." *Conrad Grebel Review* 24 (Spring 2006), 47.

CONCLUSION

Was John Howard Yoder responsible for the slow ebb of footwashing in his denomination during his lifetime? Certainly not. Any number of factors, both sociocultural and ecclesial, have played far more important roles in the decline. And yet those partisan to the practice can only lament his relative silence on the ritual and conclude that his perspective on the sacraments, one that paid attention to their political and missional value but gave short shrift to their formative or physical nature, helped to divert attention from the decline of a Mennonite practice with deep history. Hardly an ossified or mechanical ritual, footwashing is a powerful rite—an embodied confession that incorporates embodied, vulnerable interaction and facilitates reconciliation even while it provides a script and rehearsal for politics within the Christian body. Footwashing provides a regular setting in which members can "perform their faith," to borrow the language of Hauerwas.[71] It is an embodied politics that runs entirely against the grain of power and earned status in the wider society. The practice of footwashing offers Anabaptists a practical step for making good on their commitment to serve and be served, to forgive and be forgiven. If the radical "confronting and forgiving" that Yoder promoted has proven too difficult or problem-prone to practice, perhaps we can at least agree to regularly wash one another's feet.

71. Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 156.