

**BY ED CHRISTIAN**

Ask any deacon. It's a well known fact that on Communion Sabbath perhaps only about half the regular members of most congregations will show up. Some slip away after Sabbath school. Others satisfy a longstanding desire to visit the church in the next town. There's something about Communion Sabbath that breeds colds, flu, bronchitis, and gout.

Why is that? I don't think it's because the day is so boring. I don't think it's because people are against celebrating Communion. Frankly, I think it's because many people think of what we call "the ordinance of humility" as an ordeal of humility: they suffer from fear of foot washing.

I can understand. In the first 16 years after I was baptized I participated in Communion only one time, and all because I was far too shy to ask someone if I could wash his feet_or worse, if he would wash mine. How embarrassing it seemed. It was far easier simply to disappear after Sabbath school and face up to Mom and Dad's hurt looks later.

Christ's washing of His disciples' feet appears in only one of the Gospels--John 13:1-17--and only a small percentage of Christians consider Christ's command that we wash each

ABOUT THE REVIEW

INSIDE THIS WEEK
WHAT'S UPCOMING
GET PAST ISSUES
LATE-BREAKING NEWS
OUR PARTNERS
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CONTACT US
PRINT INDEX

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SUNSET CALENDAR

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Exclude PDF Files

 [Email this article](#)

other's feet literal and binding.

Why Humility, Anyway?

Why then do we do it? How can we overcome our fear of it? How can we best appreciate it? What blessings will be ours if we practice it?

The Bible seldom mentions humility. In the Old Testament the humble, like the poor, are seen as mistreated people who will someday get what they have coming to them. The apostles seem to recognize the value of humility, but are too busy spreading the gospel to dwell on it.

But Jesus, Son of God and Lord of the universe, not only taught but exemplified an extreme and general humility, and nowhere more movingly than at the Last Supper. Humility is such an alien concept in our sinful world that it can seem somehow unnatural, inhuman. We sometimes suspect that those who seem humble are actually hypocritical schemers. Yet Jesus taught us that humility is a virtue.

Ellen White writes in *The Desire of Ages*: "There is in man a disposition to esteem himself more highly than his brother, to work for self, to seek the highest place; and often this results in evil surmisings and bitterness of spirit. The ordinance preceding the Lord's Supper is to clear away these misunderstandings, to bring man out of his selfishness, down from his stilts of self-exaltation, to the humility of heart that will lead him to serve his brother."¹

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If we're humble, we don't blame the poor for their poverty: we help them. If we're humble, we don't stone those who have sinned: we plead with them and forgive them. To be humble is to say, "Whatever I am, whatever my merits in human eyes, my goodness compared with the goodness of Christ is but filthy rags. I am fit only to serve. How can I serve you?"

Because this humility is both hard to attain and hard to retain, the ordinance of humility is a precious opportunity for us to humble ourselves as we ought, and its value is

inestimable. As Ellen White writes: "Whenever this ordinance is rightly celebrated, the children of God are brought into a holy relationship, to help and bless each other."²

When Jesus, after sharing the Passover meal with His disciples, knelt like the lowliest of servants to wash His disciples' feet, the disciples were mortified. None of them had considered himself subservient enough to serve his friends. Now the Master, unquestionably superior to all of them, was stooping to the task. When Peter protested, it was because what Jesus was doing was humiliating. To see Christ in such a posture wrenched him to his soul. As well it ought.

As we practice the ordinance of humility it is not only the washing of the feet of others that embarrasses us, but, perhaps more so, having our own feet washed. There's something private about the washing of feet, quite different from the washing of hands. Like certain medical examinations, it can seem an invasion of something that is ours alone.

Don't stay away from church on Communion Sabbath because foot washing embarrasses you. Treasure that embarrassment. There are psychological reasons that it's there and that it's important.

I remember when, running through the woods at age 10, I fell and scraped my palm quite badly on a rock, embedding tiny bits of gravel. They had to come out, so my grandmother, using a needle, dug them out. She was as careful and gentle as she could be, and I didn't make a sound, but the pain of it made me pass out. When I awoke, my unconsciousness frightened me and lowered my inhibitions so much that I burst into tears, much to my embarrassment. (When something physically or psychologically jarring occurs to us, we become unusually susceptible to emotion. If you don't believe that, think of a time your car was wrecked, you fell on the ice, or your child nearly drowned.)

Foot washing is like that. Because it's unusual, because it's embarrassing, it breaks something open in us, lowers our inhibitions, opens doors to the soul so that God's Spirit can flow in. This spiritual opening to God's grace can be easily missed if we chat and laugh during the service, or focus the mind on other things. But to do that is to miss a wonderful

blessing.

Ellen White's rich description of those blessings in the chapter titled "A Servant of Servants" deserves to be quoted at length. She writes: "Christ in the fullness of His grace is there [during the ordinance of humility] to change the current of the thoughts that have been running in selfish channels. The Holy Spirit quickens the sensibilities of those who follow the



example of their Lord. As the Saviour's humiliation for us is remembered, thought links with thought; a chain of memories is called up, memories of God's great goodness and of the favor and tenderness of earthly friends. Blessings forgotten, mercies abused, kindnesses slighted, are called to mind. Roots of bitterness that have crowded out the precious plant of love are made manifest. Defects of character, neglect of duties, ingratitude to God, coldness toward our brethren, are called to remembrance. Sin is seen in the light in which God views it. Our thoughts are not thoughts of self-complacency, but of severe self-censure and humiliation. The mind is energized to break down every barrier that has caused alienation. Evil thinking and evilspeaking are put away. Sins are confessed, they are forgiven. The subduing grace of Christ comes into the soul, and the love of Christ draws hearts together in a blessed unity."³

Overcoming the Fear

How can we overcome our fear of foot washing? The first step is to recognize the possible blessings we can gain from it and determine that we want to share in them. The second step is to realize that it may always make us a bit nervous but that the first few times take the most courage. The third is to try it and to be open to its power.

Many churches these days have rooms where husbands and wives can share the ordinance of humility with each other. If yours doesn't, ask your pastor about it. Washing the feet of someone with whom you are intimate is much easier than washing the feet of an acquaintance. Most husbands and wives benefit greatly from these moments of humility,

for because of their closeness, lots of petty and even unrecognized resentments can build up week by week. Washing each other's feet can do more good than hours with a therapist.

My second experience of foot washing came when I was 28, a few days after my wife, Margaret, and I became engaged. I was longing to escape the service, yet felt that I mustn't, considering that God had just given me such a lovely fiancée.

I had never heard of family foot washing, but when Margaret explained it, I liked the idea. When her father said, "Why don't you and Margaret go to the family room?" I really felt I had been accepted into her family. That foot-washing service, so long delayed, was so intense that during the Communion that followed I had an overwhelming feeling of the presence of Christ--a truly meaningful way to begin an engagement.

The most moving foot washing for me occurred in Beijing, China, in 1984. It was the first time the ordinance of humility had been allowed there in decades, and the Chinese Adventists were excited. I was very nervous--I had participated with someone other than my wife only once in my life, and there was no family room here. I would have preferred to slip out the back.

Old Brother Xu, though, one of the most godly men I've ever known, asked me to share the service with him. I'm so glad he did. As I washed his ancient, gentle feet, scarred from the torture he had endured for his faith during long years in prison, I almost felt I was washing the feet of Christ. Surely this was no humiliation, but service due. And as he washed mine, his white head bowed before me, I knew how Peter felt: I was not worthy. Yet in Christ and before God we were brothers.

Preparing for Blessing

The key to such an experience is our attitude. If we want the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts during the ordinance of humility, we can start by making it a solemn preparation for the symbolic reception of Christ's body and blood during the Communion service. If we want to feel His presence, we must be willing to become as humble and open to emotion as little children. Like an aeolian harp set on a windowsill, played by the slightest breath of a breeze, we must sit quietly and be willing to let the Spirit move us.

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We can prepare for the foot washing during the days before Communion Sabbath by thinking about the humility it represents, by asking forgiveness of those we have hurt. Perhaps the best choice of a person with whom to participate is the person we least get along with in the church. We could call the person up, tell them we're sorry, ask them to share the ordinance of humility with us. What Christian could say no_ and what enemy could remain unmoved?

After the Sabbath foot washing and Communion service at the 1998 Jerusalem Bible

Conference, a notoriously liberal professor approached a notoriously conservative scholar who had written disparagingly of his ideas and said, in my presence, "I was looking for you before the ordinance of humility. I wanted to wash your feet." Although he didn't get to do so, this brother's forgiveness and humility led the two to put aside their differences and spend the afternoon talking and praying together. The humility of foot washing breaks us and binds us.

We will be more open to the moving of God's Spirit if we reverently, without speaking, enter the room where the ordinance will take place. As we wash each other's feet it is helpful to concentrate on the act and its symbolic meaning, relishing the thought that we are both ministering to and accepting the ministry of a human who is as sinful as we are and yet, through Christ's sacrifice, also as perfect as we are in the sight of God. We can think of the time Christ did this for His disciples. And as we do, we can open our minds to God's Spirit, letting forgiveness flood our thoughts.

Potentiating the Blessing

After we've finished, it's a sweet thing to put our heads together and pray quietly in turn, asking God's forgiveness and thanking Him for the opportunity to open ourselves to each other and to Him. This prayer, so often neglected, yields a wonderful feeling of closeness.

We will be further blessed if, as we return to the sanctuary,

we remain silent. As we wait we can sit with eyes closed, thinking about Christ's suffering, His sacrifice, His presence. As we eat the bread and drink the wine we can wait, every nerve a quiver, for the overwhelming force of Christ's Spirit filling us.

If we do these things in this way, we will feel Christ's Spirit. It will settle on us, dwell in us, and lead us to love one another as Christ has loved us. We may feel shaky; we may have to blink back tears; but we will be blessed. As Ellen White writes: "The soul will be uplifted. We can partake of the Communion with a consciousness of sins forgiven. The sunshine of Christ's righteousness will fill the chambers of the mind and the soul temple. We ` behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.'"⁴

This is what the ordinance of humility, along with the Lord's Supper, is all about. Once you've experienced it in this way, once you've beheld the Lamb of God, you will never again fear it. Instead, it will seem like a foretaste of heaven.

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 650.

² *Ibid.*, p. 651.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 650, 651.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 651.

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