

Original Paper

Foot Washing as a Tool Sustaining the Nigerian Church

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Abstract

The Church is a popularly known part of the human society. The genesis was from the divine understanding of a few men and women during and after the ascension of Jesus Christ. The Church gradually grew into a great body of people of living faith. The significant impact of the Church in the human society over the years cannot be denied. The factual stance is challenging in the recent time due to the concurrent happenings of ineffectual activities perpetuated by so called 'Christians'. While this observation is about the Church in general, the periscope of this article is the Nigerian Church. In Acts 11:26, the disciples were referred first to as Christians because the unbelievers could see the Christ-like image. The effectual movement of the Church has often been geared by Church leadership from the time of Jesus Christ. The biblical framework of this paper is John 13:1-17, where the foot washing concept is explored. With the activity of Jesus and His disciples; this paper depicts several applicable lessons for the sustenance of the Nigerian Church. Cardinal among the lessons is the concept of servant leadership, love and fellowship. A clear emphasis is laid on leadership in the Nigerian Church. Jesus gave a redefinition of this integral structure having equality and equity, though with regard to authority. Above all, the acknowledgement of Christ should be re-entrenched in the Nigerian Church, such that, the place of God remained usurped and His glory shared with no man!

Keywords

Disciples, Foot washing, Jesus Christ, Nigerian Church

1. Introduction

The foot washing took place during the last supper of Jesus Christ and his disciples. Although there were several meals during Jesus' ministry on earth, this supper was the last one. It is often called 'the last supper' because it was the last one Christ had with his disciples before his death and ascension. John 13-17 where the main text of this paper is situated forms the full body of the farewell discourse; it

reveals that there was no miraculous provision of the food unlike the five thousand; no one was raised from the dead as at Bethany a few days earlier. Rather, Jesus had this last meal with his disciples around, speaking to them about His imminent suffering, death, betrayal by Judas Iscariot, denial of Peter, among several other teachings.

Only the Gospel of John records this event of the foot washing, which took place at the beginning of the meal. The normal practice was for a servant to wash the feet of the guest. "...here is your servant maid, a servant to wash the feet of my Lord" (1st Sam 25, p. 41). Abigail said this David, in token of genuine humility. This is also reflecting of John the Baptist's statement about the Messiah. In view of this, several interpretations have been made on this event, however, the basis theological interpretation is the stance that Jesus, however, Jesus demonstrated a living parable of his love for His disciples that stands for all time, as a picture of humility and the one who took the form of bondservant who became obedient to the point of death (Phil 2, pp. 7-8). In other words, Jesus' humility and the blessing of imitating Him (13, p. 17) absolutely points to nothing but the cross.

The foot washing act of Jesus is embedded with rich and deep spiritual connotations; the focus of this article is several elements reflected in Jesus' act while He was performing a prologue for the cross. The sustenance of the Church was at Jesus' heart; no wonder he still called the disciples to the side and had a great long discourse (John, pp. 13-17) with them before his departure. Christ wants a body (Church) adequately sustained no matter what. Several issues regarding the Nigerian Church spur the interest of this paper.

Since the Nigerian Church had turned this way; how the Church can be maintained and sustained becomes a question. This is the issue this paper seeks to resolve. A careful analysis of John 13: 1-17 is suggestive of a great re-entrenchment of the Nigerian Church. The sustenance of the Church is not built on Church edifices or cathedral, but on the Christians themselves. Thus, all the observed elements of John 13:1-17 which is useful for sustaining the Nigerian Church, applies basic to the relationship of Nigerian Christians with the head of the Church (Christ) and their interpersonal relationship with one another.

2. Foot Washing Concept

Foot washing is a common practice in the Palestinian world due to the nature of the roads. expression of hospitality in the Bible times. People travelling dusty roads in Palestine needed to wash their feet for cleanliness and comfort (Youngblood, 1995). Guests were often offered water and vessels for washing their feet (Gen 18:14, Judg 19:21). The act of washing the feet was generally performed by the lowliest servant in the household (Lk 7:44). This implies that the washing of guest's feet is not to be done by freeborn but servants, maids or slaves. Even among servants, there are grades. The stance is from the fact that the Jews prefer Gentile servants to perform this duty. Thus, the common understanding of foot washing has to do with the inferior to the superior.

Unlike the Northern Nigeria, the foot washing concept is somewhat far-fetched from the Southern part

of Nigeria. The similarity of environmental factor in the Palestinian world is similar to the northern Nigeria; this is often why both Muslims and Christians are seen with veils to cover their body to prevent dust. In other words, the foot washing concept is easily absorbed by a northern Nigerian than a southern Nigeria. However, the foot washing concept is relevant to the Nigerian Church as explicitly demonstrated by Jesus connoting several significance.

3. Background to the Text

For three years Christ had lived, worked and travelled with the twelve men that were his apostles they all (exception of one) had loved him, served him and sacrificed the home unfit worldly wealth in order to follow him. But at a point, upon all, abruptly, he was going to leave them. Meanwhile, Jesus had told them several times that he must leave them. But often they do not take it as anything because they don't want to hear, and so they soon forget. The opening verse sets the scene not merely for the foot washing but for the entire farewell discourse (Jhn 13-17). This time marker 'before the feast of the Passover build up the Passover. The first five verses create the setting, followed by the all of the foot washing itself and Jesus words of instruction. The practice of foot washing has a long Old Testament tradition, usually performed by slaves. In this instance, Christ performed this role to teach the followers on the importance of humble and holy service (Gal 13:1-5, 6:2, Phil 2:6-8).

It important to note that Christ was not a tennis player who struggles valiantly all through a tennis tournament but loses the last match, and so goes home, Christ was not even like the champion who wins the last match, and then with the tournament over retires, for Jesus Christ going home to the father was itself an integral part of the tournament, an indispensable part of the provision and process of fulfilling his mission. While the science of this biblical text tragic because of the departure of the master, the reality of this events is the consummate expression of Jesus love. Another dimension of this event is that it represented a cosmic battle, Satan was at work trying to stop Jesus, using Judas act of betrayer. However, no opposition could stop what the father had hammed and the authority the father has given to the son (Bock, 2002).

4. Analysis of the Text

John does not tell where Jesus washed his disciples feet, but it is likely that it was at the upper room talked about in Mark 14;14-15 and Luke 22;10-12. The only info John made recipients privy to the fact that the event took place before the Passover feast (13; 1a). During this Passover, unlike the prior Old Testament understanding of the Passover lamb killed by the children of God, the eternal lamb of God was meant to die and Jesus know this fully well (vs. 1b). At this great transitional moment in history, around Jesus were His twelve disciples whom he had loved, one of whom was going to betray him - Jhn13:2 (Adeyemo, 2006). Was it that Jesus overestimated His disciple's intentions? Or underestimated the wretched selfishness and fickleness of human heart? No, Jesus knows His disciples; He knew the betrayal plan of Judas (vs. 11) and that Peter would deny Him (vs. 36-38).

Far beyond this, Jesus also knew that behind Judas' treachery and Peter's weakness, there a more sinister power using both of them to defeat in advance, if it could, all Jesus' intentions (13:2). Jesus was aware that he had come from God and was returning to Him (13:3). This has always been the intended sweep of his mission to our world. Jesus came with all the authority behind Him, but not to stay. Satan in an attempt to thwart God's influence over men and women was working to have Christ slung out of this world by brutal execution (the highest shameful punishment of that time). Misguidedly enough, the suffering of the cross were to be the very means by which Christ would provide forgiveness for all human who believed on Him, and even eternal life. In this confidence, Jesus rose from the table and was the feet of the disciples. The action of Jesus' washing of the disciple's feet when taken in its literal form signifies the need to hold a foot-washing ceremony from time to time . But in a symbolic manner connotes a spiritual form of cleansing. This answers why Jesus said not all of the disciples were clean (vs. 10).

During the time of Jesus, washing people's feet was normally a menial task performed by a very lowly servant or even a slave. In instructing the disciples to wash each other's feet, Jesus simply saying they must adopt the genuine heart-attitude of a servant and be prepared to serve people in whatever practical way is necessary. Following Jesus' instruction is suggestive of an attitude of mind and heart that looks for opportunity to serve and counts no task below its dignity. This activity is a chain of service and it gives a clear definition of the concept of service. From God to Jesus, to Jesus' disciples to those who will listen to their message and in turn proclaim it to others. This is why Jesus informed the disciples of the blessings in serving.

5. Implications of Foot-Washing

From a lucid understanding of the text, this article further highlights several relevance of the foot washing concept for the sustenance of the Nigerian Church.

Fellowship

This does not in any way distort status-quo. In the Church, fellowship with other believers is very important. Although Jesus is superior to the disciples he still had the feast with them. Fellowship is the correct nature of the Church; this is where God's children come together to commune with the father. Love is the backbone of any fellowship, it sustains fellowship. Love must exist between Church members to members and also between members and ministers also (Jacob & Kolawole, 2020a). This love element is an integral flavour that must saturate fellowship. Recent happenings in the Nigerian Church have called for serious attention in terms of restructuring the Church in view of the true concept of love. Hierarchy shouldn't deter fellowship; it must rather be done without segregation, sentiment and intimidation (Kolawole, 2019). The Nigerian Church is filled with people who see themselves higher than others; this makes fellowship ineffective; also, pride sets in. Although Jesus fellowshiped with the disciples, He remained their rabbi. Fellowship helps build and sustain the Church, and eventually expose the wolves among the sheep.

6. Conviction

One of the salient themes John stresses is the fact that Jesus was sure of his origin, mission and destination. This fuel Jesus' strength against any form of oppositional scheme; thus, the devil's trap became means for Jesus' mission fulfilment. This is because Jesus was driven by the conviction; He was sure of what He knows. Conviction is a cogent element if the Nigerian Church will be sustained. Many Nigerian Christians run from pole to post due to so called "problems" because they are not sure of what they said they believed. Then the question lingers; do they even have any conviction at all? Do they really know what they believe? Were they sure of what they believe? Conviction here is personal, having to do with individual. This implies that the conviction of the father cannot work for the son.

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified ... For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans, 8, pp. 28-30, pp. 38-39). Conviction as this sets a Christian's heart rejoicing and firm.

Servant-Leadership

Jesus could have stayed longer with the disciples; perhaps, He would have given them more teachings on ethics that He gave in the Sermon on the Mount, among several other teachings, signs and preaching; but this by itself wouldn't have turned the disciples and several other people who believed into holy men; for it could not have given them the power to live Christ. Rather, the only way Jesus could make available to them the power necessary was by giving himself away; in other words, by giving himself up as a sacrifice! In view of this, a leader must be ready to first sacrifice himself; if the Nigerian Church will be sustained, then, leaders that have the orientation of self-sacrifice must be developed. This implies that the Nigerian Church will be effectively sustained if Church members and leaders (regardless of the cedar) are ready to sacrifice themselves. The sacrifice in this sphere though built on Christ's death does not in all entirety connote death; but it also involves a sense of denial and perseverance; such that in everything, the welfare and wellbeing of others comes first.

The appearance of leaders in the Nigerian Church matters. It is good to appear in modest apparel. Jesus' dressing in the course of the foot-washing exercise is symbolic of the fact that leaders should serve the people (Kolawole, 2020c). Nigerian Church leaders should not use leadership platforms for self-aggrandizement but for positively imparting the life of others. "John is described as wearing clothes made of camel hair with a leather belt around his waist. John is identified with the great prophet Elijah who also wore a cloak made of animal skins tied with a leather belt" (Kolawole, 2019a). The leader's modest appearance must be congruent with character (Adelodun & Kolawole, 2020e). Jesus' life was exemplary (13:15) so also Church leaders in Nigeria follow suit.

It is obviously difficult for some Church leaders to serve the followers simply because of their motives before venturing into Church leadership. The mindset of a man before engaging in the way has a long way to go in the output. How happy would it have been for the Church cried Charles Simeon in a better age than ours, if all ministers and members had ascended to the rule of the calling Lord and following his commandments (Keddie, 2001).

Christian leadership is a leadership of love. A Church leadership devoid of genuine love is a fake leadership, unless marked by Christ love (Kolawole, 2020a). Though a man possesses all other leadership abilities and skills, he isn't qualified to be a Christian leader until he loves those he is to lead with the love of Christ. In the contemporary Nigeria Church, love has lost its place in Church leadership selection; it is mostly ranked behind other things like money, political offices, influence, among others (Kolawole, 2019); that's even if it's found among the quality role at all. Selection of men is now based on flaunt of cars, influence and affluence instead of men who are driven by the love of Christ to serve.

Equality and Equity

Jesus treated all His disciples equally; no discrimination, favouritism, sentiment or tribalism. He ensured the washing of all the disciple's feet, what applies to Mr. A is what applies to Mr. B. Even when Peter objected, Jesus gave Him reasons to be a part of the foot-washing. Christian leaders in Nigeria are selective of the status of individuals whom they would like to interface with; this frustrated the chances of many people who seem hopeless in the society (Kolawole, 2019a). Equality and equity must be upheld in the Nigerian Church to sustain the Christian values and integrity. This must extend to the status-quo of women (Jacob & Kolawole, 2020a) and their involvement in ministry; in other words, all Christians should be treated with due respect and honour; without partiality.

Acknowledgement of Christ

The disciples acknowledged Christ as master and Lord (vs. 13). In the Nigerian Church today, ministers are being elevated almost too high than the bridegroom Himself. It is unfortunate that some ministers do not rebuke this bad nature; this is disastrous (Kolawole, 2020e). This has grown to the extent that some Nigerian Christians now find pleasure in "Papa or Mama says" than "Jesus says". Some ministers even demand the respect that should be accorded to God; while some are blunt, some demonstrate theirs in words and actions. Due to the type of Church government, some elders or deacons see themselves as "all in all" usurping the place of Christ. "My ministry syndrome" must be condemned if the Nigerian Church will be sustained in this contemporary time; thereby, restoring the Church's owner to the rightful owner-Christ.

Respect of Constituted Authority

Respect is reciprocal. Absence of pride should not amount to lawlessness, anarchy or disrespect of leaders in the Church. Also, Jesus' redefinition of leadership as discussed in the previous part of this article is not a license for discord and disobedience on the part of the follows in the Church. Jesus

employs the same argument in Matthew 10:24-25 and John 15:20 to stiffen the disciple's steadfastness; this in turn applies to holy living. If the Church will be sustained, this principle cannot be sidelined; the other refuges are hypocrisy and apostasy. While this is related to the relationship of leaders and followers, a clear understanding indicates that it applies to the relationship of the Church as a whole with God.

Conclusion

The sustenance of the Church is cardinal to the fulfilment of her mandate on earth (Kolawole, 2020f). Church wellbeing is of immense importance if the mandate will be effectively accomplished. There is great expectation on the Nigerian Church in Africa; unfortunately, the entire nature is defaulting in several spheres. It is non-contestable, the relevance of Jesus' demonstration in the analyzed text to the Nigerian Church cannot be overemphasized; thus, Nigerian Christians, ministers and members alike have lots of role to carry out. The sustenance of the Nigerian Church is a collective responsibility. This is not a denominational issue; instead, it calls for the entire Nigeria Christian circle to review and restructure their activities in view of Jesus' action. Convinced by what every genuine Nigerian Christian believes; the element of humility and respect for constituted authority should not be lacking in the Nigerian Church. Christians across the nation should be driven by fellowship and also bear the hallmark of servant-leadership within and without the Church. The Nigerian Church will be sustained and transformed to continually positively affect the nation and entire continent at large.

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