Seventh-day Adventists and the Lord’s Supper

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Seventh-day Adventist Statement of Faith #15: The Lord’s Supper: The Lord’s Supper is a participation in the emblems of the body and blood of Jesus as an expression of faith in Him, our Lord and Saviour. In this experience of communion Christ is present to meet and strengthen His people. As we partake, we joyfully proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes again. Preparation for the Supper includes self-examination, repentance, and confession. The Master ordained the service of foot washing to signify renewed cleansing, to express a willingness to serve one another in Christlike humility, and to unite our hearts in love. The communion service is open to all believing Christians. (1 Cor. 10:16, 17; 11:23-30; Matt. 26:17-30; Rev. 3:20; John 6:48-63; 13:1-17.)

The Lord’s Supper is first mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-23). It was instituted by Jesus and focuses on Jesus. It is unthinkable to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, also called Communion or Eucharist, without reference to Jesus.

Although linked to the Passover, the Lord’s Supper is seen to be a new and unique institution in the New Testament, one that has become an integral part of Christianity down through the centuries.

Interestingly enough, the Lord’s Supper is not mentioned in the Gospel of John, though Jesus’ speech about the bread of life in John 6 seems to contain a reference to it.

On the other hand, foot washing—as the other ordinance instituted by the earthly Jesus Himself—is found in John’s Gospel alone, and not in the Synoptics. Rather than being contradictory, these Gospel accounts are complementary. Both ordinances, the Lord’s Supper and foot washing, are part of the Passion narrative in all four Gospels.

Interestingly, John’s account dealing with the foot washing mentions in passing that it was done at a meal where Jesus and His disciples were present (John 13:1-16). Obviously, foot washing goes along with a meal, both in terms of the regular customs of the day and in terms of the ceremonial meanings that Jesus attached to these two actions.

Foot washing in the Old Testament

The earliest references to washing feet are found in Genesis. There foot washing precedes participating in a meal (Gen. 18:4, 5; 24:32, 33). Therefore, it seems best for Christians to celebrate both ordinances in conjunction, with foot washing preceding the Lord’s Supper and preparing participants for it.

Old Testament references show that it was a custom of that time and an act of courtesy and hospitality to offer visitors water for washing their feet. Obviously, no spiritual meaning was attached to this type of foot washing.

In the book of Exodus, however, the priests had to wash their hands and feet before serving at the sanctuary. In this case, the idea of cleanliness and purity is present, which allowed a priest to serve his people in the presence of God. This kind of purity seems to have surpassed mere bodily cleanliness. A holy God was to be approached by pure people.
With few exceptions, people during Old Testament times seemed to have washed their own feet after having received some water (Gen. 18:4; 2 Sam. 11:8). Sometimes the act may have been performed by a servant. According to 1 Samuel 25:41, the wife of Nabal was willing to wash the feet of David’s men.

Although foot washing was not uncommon and contained the concept of cleanliness, Jesus gave it a new meaning and used a new approach.

Foot washing and the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament

Washing feet is mentioned again in 1 Timothy 5:10. Opinions are divided over whether or not this passage refers to the ordinance of foot washing. Whereas S. Horn holds “that foot washing was practiced in the early church is attested by Paul” (1 Tim. 5:10), H. Kiesler seems to understand it as “a gracious mark of hospitality” as also found in Luke 7:44. The emphasis on washing the feet of “saints,” or God’s people, seems to make it more likely that 1 Timothy 5:10 stresses participation in the ordinance of foot washing.

When it comes to the Lord’s Supper, we find additional information outside the Gospels. In Acts we hear that “they [the early Christians] were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

The phrase “breaking of bread” points to the eating of a meal. It may include the Lord’s Supper. But the Lord’s Supper is not always in view when we read this phrase, although it is quite probable that the Lord’s Supper is meant in Acts 2:42.

The previous verse talks about receiving the Word, baptism, and people being added to the church. Verse 42 continues with religious activities and ends with prayer. The breaking of bread may very well refer to the Lord’s Supper.

Clearer evidence is found in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11. In chapter 10 Paul discusses the issue of idolatry. He asks how fellowship with Christ and with evil spirits go together. He argues that participation in the Lord’s Supper and participation in a pagan cult ceremony are incompatible.

In chapter 11 he deals with an abuse of the Lord’s Supper in the Corinthian church, and even reports Jesus’ own words when he instituted the Lord’s Supper. As in the Gospels, the focus is on the Lord and His gracious provisions.

The beauty and meaning of foot washing

Both foot washing and the Lord’s Supper have been understood and practiced differently by Christians throughout the centuries. In some cases Christians avoid one or both ordinances; in others, they celebrate the Lord’s Supper on a daily basis and build their faith on an actual repetition of Christ’s sacrifice.

They may argue for transubstantiation, consubstantiation, the symbolic character of the emblems and the special presence of the Lord, or the sacramental nature of the Lord’s Supper, which seems to be considered automatically effective independent of the attitude of the receiver. In the case of some, the ordinances are too sacred to participate in. In the case of others, there is difficulty keeping a balance between what is common and what is holy.

What is the theological meaning of the ordinances of foot washing and the Lord’s Supper?
Starting with foot washing, the following elements should be stressed:

The Lord’s love (John 13:1). Foot washing stresses the Lord’s love. The paragraph containing the account of how Jesus instituted it is encircled by the principle of love.

In John 13:1 Jesus’ love is stressed, His love toward His disciples, even to Judas Iscariot, who became His enemy (John 13:1-4, 10, 11). In spite of what He knew would happen soon, He served the traitor as He did the rest of His disciples. In doing this, Jesus showed us how to live. Love, not retaliation, is the principle of the kingdom.

As soon as Judas had left Jesus and the group of disciples, Jesus (according to John’s Gospel) issued His new commandment: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34, 35). Foot washing is an act of sacrificial love.

The Lord’s service and humility (John 13:4, 5). The Old Testament references to foot washing do not report a single case in which a superior washed the feet of an inferior. Abraham, it seems, did not wash the Lord’s feet but did at least provide water for His feet to be washed (Gen. 18:4). But Jesus, God of eternity, stooped down to wash His disciples’ and His enemy’s feet.

His condescension did not stop with His lowly birth or with His hard life as a refugee and a laborer. The Word who was God, and through whom all things are made (John 1:1-3), the One who could say “Before Abraham was born, I Am” (John 8:58), He who stated that “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), and whom Thomas would call “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28), He took a towel, girded Himself, and washed His disciples’ feet.

Other masters are served by their followers. This Master serves His followers, all of them. Jesus humbled Himself (Phil. 2:8). Obviously it is not enough for us to exhibit humility; the Lord wants us to bow down and wash each others’ feet. This may seem objectionable, inconvenient, even humiliating, but the Lord wants us to do it. The ordinance of foot washing is designed “to wash away all feeling of pride, selfishness, and self-aggrandizement.”

Foot washing is a sign of willing service and humility.

The Lord’s means to stress equality before God and fellowship with one another (John 13:13-16). Although Christianity does not do away with all social distinctions, before God all differences of rank, status, race, gender, and age no longer count. The Christian master bows down and washes the feet of his slave, who is in fact his brother in Christ. In this sense, foot washing is in many ways a critique of social injustice. It encourages intimate fellowship among all the members of the church.

The Lord’s means for believers to have full fellowship with Jesus (John 13:8). Peter, who wanted to prevent Jesus from serving him, had to recognize that such a decision would mean separation from Jesus. “Peter would much rather wash Jesus’ feet than that Jesus should wash his feet; he would prefer to lay down his life for Jesus than that Jesus should lay down His life for him.” But we cannot save ourselves.

Washing each others’ feet recognizes that we are always dependent on our Lord for salvation. He served us first, and we have part with Him. Therefore, we serve others and also enjoy fellowship with them.

The Lord’s cleansing (John 13:10). Foot washing is associated with cleansing. It is evident from the way Jesus spoke to His disciples about His act of washing their feet that
a symbolic cleansing is intended rather than a mere cleansing from the dust of the road. The end of verse 10 shows that Judas was not clean because he had made the decision to become the traitor.

Thus, the concept of cleanness deals with moral purity and moral defilement. Even after having been washed completely at the beginning of our walk with the Lord, further cleansing through the act of foot washing is necessary.

The figurative language of John 13:10 seems to refer to baptism and compares it to foot washing. The term louo (“to bathe,” “to wash”) is used in Hebrews 10:22 to describe baptism. Members of the Christian community commit sins even after having been baptized. These postbaptismal sins require forgiveness. Foot washing points to the fact that Jesus is willing to wash away these sins and cleanse us.

We need forgiveness, and forgiveness is granted to us.

The Lord’s command (John 13:14-16). Jesus calls us to follow His example. He has washed the feet of His disciples. We wash the feet of our fellow believers. As Jesus set an example in being baptized—and we follow Him—as He set an example of how to celebrate the Lord’s Supper—and we follow Him—so Jesus set an example in washing the disciples’ feet—and we are to follow Him in this also. We, the servants, are not greater than the Master, and discipleship involves imitating the Lord and Teacher.

The Lord’s blessing (John 13:17). Finally, Jesus declares those blessed, fortunate, and happy who participate in foot washing. It is not an empty ritual. Maybe we have to detect anew its deep meaning and implications and gain a greater blessing by thoughtfully washing each others’ feet. A blessing is waiting for us.

The beauty and meaning of the Lord’s Supper

The foot washing with the aspect of cleansing has set the stage and the tone for the subsequent Lord’s Supper.

Salvation through Christ (Matt. 26:17-19). The Lord’s Supper was originally linked to and grew out of Passover. Both Passover and the Lord’s Supper still share some common elements. The participants eat. They drink of the cup. Their thoughts turn to God, and God intervenes. He brings about salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord. All slavery is gone. Freedom is restored. We can enjoy fellowship with God and serve Him willingly. We are saved through Jesus Christ.

The means of salvation: Christ’s flesh and blood (Matt. 26:26). In the Lord’s Supper, the bread represents the body of Christ and the contents of the cup, the blood of Christ. The life of Jesus and His death are the only means for our salvation. By celebrating the Lord’s Supper, we recognize that all attempts to save ourselves are futile. We are dependent on what Jesus has done for us, not on what we have done, are doing, or will do.

In light of the Cross all our attempts at self-improvement and all our intriguing ideas of using the powers of the self in order to reach our full potential are useless.

Remembering Christ (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). The Lord’s Supper is taken as a remembrance of the substitutionary atonement. Because we forget so easily, because we may tend to grow too accustomed to the gracious gift of salvation, because we are imperiled by our reliance on ourselves instead of on the Lord, we constantly have to remember what Jesus has done for us. The Lord’s Supper is a memorial service, not a
funeral service. It is a joyous celebrating of the love of the Godhead and the sacrifice of Christ that has brought us to full salvation.

The fellowship of Christ and unity in Christ (1 Cor. 10:16, 17). In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul stresses to a great extent the concept of koinonia. The term can be translated as “fellowship,” “a close mutual relationship,” “sharing in,” or “participation” to name some possibilities.

In the Communion we participate in the blood of Jesus. “Those who receive the cup rightly receive Christ. They are bound together in fellowship with Christ. . . . Such a reception is, of course, a spiritual process, and therefore takes place by faith. . . . The statement about the bread must be understood similarly: the broken loaf means a participation in the body of Christ.”

The fellowship with Jesus produces fellowship with those who belong to Him. Because we partake of one bread, we become one body. The Lord’s Supper contributes to the unity of the church.

The new covenant in Christ (Matt. 26:28). Jesus taught that the cup that we take represents the blood of the covenant. A new covenant was already promised by God through Jeremiah. There are elements of continuity and discontinuity between the old and the new covenants.

God’s basic law and intentions would not change. But whereas the old covenant only foreshadowed the new covenant, salvation became a reality under the new covenant, not through the sacrifices of animals but through the sacrifice of Christ. “In the Last Supper this new covenant became a reality. As the disciples partook of the cup, they participated in the provisions and power of that new covenant, made possible by Christ’s death. . . . In Bible times a covenant was often consummated with a meal. By eating together, the parties committed themselves to fulfill their pledges. . . . Jesus would shed His blood for them, making possible their salvation; He also agreed to prepare for them a place in God’s kingdom, to which He eventually would take them. . . . As their part of the agreement, Christians partake of the emblems of His sacrifice as evidence of their compliance with the terms of the covenant.”

The covenant concept stresses the close relationship between the two parties involved in the covenant. We enjoy such a close relationship with God.

Forgiveness through Christ (Matt. 26:28). In taking the Lord’s Supper we remember that our sins are taken care of by Christ. One of the most important elements of the new covenant, especially stressed in the book of Hebrews, is the fact that forgiveness is a reality to those who repent and believe.

We do not need to live guilt-ridden lives. We do not need to fear God or Christ’s second coming. The Lord’s Supper reminds us that we are free from sin and guilt as we accept Christ’s gift of redemption and forgiveness and commit our lives to Him.

The expectation of Christ’s second coming (Matt. 26:29; 1 Cor. 11:26). The Lord’s Supper not only takes us back to the life and death of Jesus but points ahead to Christ’s second coming.

By partaking of the emblems, we remember that Jesus has promised to eat and drink with us again in His Father’s kingdom. By partaking of the emblems, we confess that we are eagerly waiting for His return.

Loyalty to Christ (1 Cor. 10:21). It is a serious contradiction to attempt to worship Christ by celebrating the Lord’s Supper while we worship ancient or contemporary idols.
The Lord’s Supper calls for us to express our loyalty to Christ as the supreme Lord of our lives and challenges us each time we take part in its emblems to recommit our lives to our only Savior and Hope.

**Proclaiming Christ (1 Cor. 11:26).** Participation in the Communion is an act of proclamation. We confess that we are followers of Christ, in order that we may rely on His merits only. We are grateful with all our heart and mind for His life, death, and ministry for us, and we look forward to and count on His second coming.

We keep our priorities in order because of what He has done for us, is doing for us, and will be doing for us.

**Living lives worthy of Christ (1 Cor. 11:27).** Finally, the Lord’s Supper has an ethical dimension.

Paul discusses abuses of the Communion in 1 Corinthians 11 and stresses that we cannot play with the Lord’s Supper but must celebrate it worthily. What does this mean? The context tells us that the way in which we treat our brothers and sisters is crucial.

The Lord’s Supper not only has a vertical dimension, namely our relationship with God, but influences the horizontal, our relationship with each other.

**Conclusion**

Foot washing and the Lord’s Supper are rich and beautiful in meaning. In them our Lord wants to meet us, and we want to be open to Him for Him. When we meet to celebrate the ordinances, we lay aside all routine and whatever hinders us to listen to His voice and His story. We accept the Lord’s invitation to His wonderful meal.

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1 E.g., Gen. 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24.
2 See also Judges 19:21.
3 Exod. 30:19, 21; 40:31.
7 Kiesler, 594.
9 See Kiesler, 593; Tasker, 158.
10 In both cases the perfect participle of the verb is used.
11 See, 1 John 1:7 and 9 in which cleansing from sin comes through the blood of Jesus when sinners confess their transgressions.
13 The idea of fellowship may be present already in Matthew 26:27.
14 Kiesler, 598.