

A Postmodern Theology of Ritual Action?
An Exploration of Foot Washing
Among the Original Free Will Baptist Community

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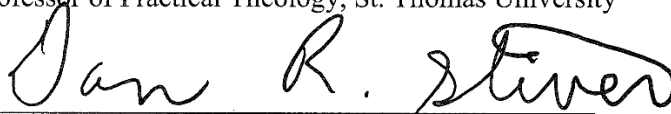
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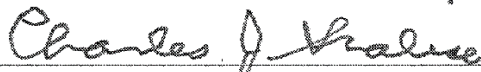
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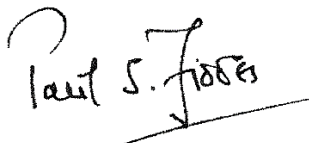
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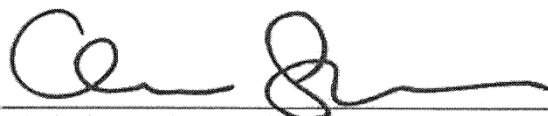
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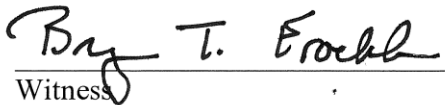
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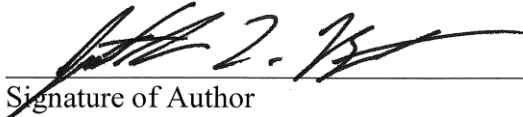
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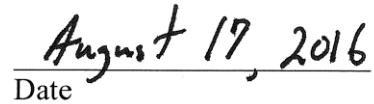
**A Postmodern Theology of Ritual Action?
An Exploration of Foot Washing Among the Original Free Will Baptist
Community**

Jonathan L. Best

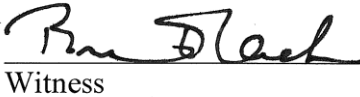
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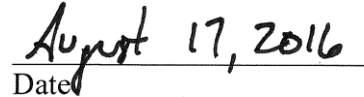
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Abstract

This work of practical theology explores the meanings of ritual action through a postmodern lens of hermeneutics and deconstruction. This work attempts to demonstrate that meaning is already present within ritual action rather than outside it. That is meaning is not imparted upon ritual action, instead meaning is already present in human action and community. Using hermeneutical tools and the openness of deconstruction, this work explores meaning within the Christian practice of foot washing among the Original Free Will Baptist (OFWB) denomination of Eastern North Carolina. This work is a theological and philosophical conversation with the OFWB and the ways in which foot washing has molded and shaped the character of the people. Through this conversation, meaning within ritual action is explored with the help of social theory and practice, phenomenology, and postmodern thought. Finally, this conversation ends with the themes of love and ecclesiology, ultimately pointing towards a future relational practical theology. Foot washing suggests a new future for theology, a future that models love, service, and acceptance.

Acknowledgments

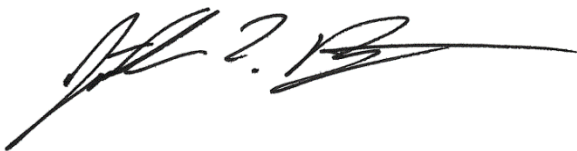
The dissertation experience is a difficult and arduous one. One cannot begin to understand the mental and emotional adversity that goes into dissertation writing. It is an alienating journey, but it is not a journey done alone. This work is not simply the result of my own individual strength. An author is always indebted to others, more accurately it is the result of support and encouragement from many loved ones and friends. To be frank, this work would not be possible without the generous love and support of others. My work is indebted to the eternal other, the idea that we are all connected and meant to serve one another. Authorship is not a singular experience, it is a communal one. Thus these are my words, but the spirit and love behind them come from others.

Specifically there are several people I want to thank. First I want to my chair and friend Bryan Froehle. You have molded me into the scholar I am today. I thank you for your advice, academic expertise, but most importantly your friendship. Working with you was an absolute joy. I look forward to working on more projects together in the future! I would also like to extend a special thank you to my committee members, Dan Stiver, Charles Scalise, Paul Fiddes, and Christian Scharen. It was an honor and a privilege to have such a group of distinguished scholars on my committee. I wish to thank Mary Carter Waren for inspiring me to love and seek others. You showed me that a practical theologian must love others. I also wish to thank Theodore Whapham for introducing me to the wonderful world of hermeneutics. Your classes inspired me to seek new ideas I had never considered. I would like to thank my Ph.D. cohort. I will never forget those long theological conversations during and sometimes after class. I am inspired by each and every one of you, thank you.

I want to extend a general thank you to the people of the Original Free Will Baptist denomination. I am forever indebted to love and support. It is my hope and prayer that my work brings to light your humble spirit, service, and love. I also want to extend a special thank you to the people at Free Union OFWB, Pinetown, NC. You helped to raise me into the man I am today.

To my mother and father, Carney and Peggy Best, words cannot express how much you mean to me. I am very blessed to have such loving and supportive parents. In your own gentle and loving way you have always encouraged me to do my very best. You have always given me the confidence I need to succeed, yet more importantly, you taught me how to live and love others. This work belongs to you as much as it does to me.

Finally, I wish to thank my dear and wonderful wife Rebekah Whitley Best. I know that it is not easy being married to a Ph.D. student. Reading and writing is often a lonesome and burdensome task, even more so for one's spouse. I cannot get back the many hours and days spent reading and writing, but I hope that this victory will pave the way for a bright and happy future shared together. My success is our success, and this work is yours as well as mine. You, more than any philosopher or theologian, have taught me the value of being-*with*. Being, existence itself, is best shared. I look forward to a continued future of being-with *you*. All my love, passion, and strength I give to you as your husband.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. B. Best', written in a cursive style.

Dedication

To my Wife

To my Mother and Father

Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.

Jean-Francois Lyotard

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Chapter One: Ritual Action as a Problem

Anthropos apteros for days

Walked whistling round and round the maze,

Relying happily upon

His temperament for getting on.

The hundredth time he sighted, though,

A bush he left an hour ago,

He halted where four alleys crossed

And recognized that he was lost¹

The study of ritual action² is a complex philosophical, theological, and social scientific problem. This complexity is connected to human activity and behavior. What do human actions mean? Deciphering human behavior is difficult enough. Further difficulties arise when one includes religious action in this search. Religious action brings a multitude of other questions. Sociological questions are met with questions of metaphysics, semiotics, theology, and God. Religion complicates matters, leading to a dizzying array of approaches and positions. Movement between these conflicting and polarizing positions is like navigating through a difficult maze. Walls, both old and new, continue to block the way. As with Auden's poem, several approaches promise a way

¹ W.H. Auden, "The Maze," in *W.H. Auden Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), 236.

² *Ritual action* supports the connection between ritual and action. This term is defined by Catherine Bell as ritual that "involves interaction with its immediate world, often drawing it into the very activity of the rite in multiple ways." She divides ritual action into six categories where "action is primarily communal, traditional (that is, understood as carrying on ways of acting established in the past), and rooted in beliefs in divine beings of some sort." Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 266; 94. Ritual and action are terms that should be kept together so that ritual's physicality is neither diminished nor lost.

forward: metaphysics, theology, mathematics, aesthetics, and even psychoanalysis. Yet these inevitably fail to lead *anthropos apteros*³ to the center. Frustrated and confused, *anthropos apteros* declares that “[i]n theory there is no solution.”⁴ The maze has been made too well, and there is nothing left to do but look up in despair.⁵

Like *anthropos apteros*, religious practitioners find themselves in a maze. As they navigate this maze, they continually endure the promises of “experts” who claim to know what their ritual actions mean. It matters little if the expert is a theologian or a philosopher, he or she remains situated as an outside source. These experts confidently lead religious practitioners further and further into the maze, but fail in their promises to provide clarity. The irony is that the religious practitioners should be leading the experts, yet their voices are missing. Experts miss what these actions mean to practitioners, as expressed through the practice of ritual action. The key to the maze is ritual action itself. Ritual action is already meaningful with rich theological and religious significance.⁶

Previous ways of interpreting action only provide a partial view for understanding the role of action in Christian practice. Other ways to interpret ritual action, such as metaphysics, semiotics, and ritual studies, fail to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the lives of Christian communities.⁷ Meaning and its expression is therefore a

³ *Anthropos apteros* can be translated as “human without wings” or “wingless human.”

⁴ Auden, “The Maze,” 237.

⁵ The poem concludes with *anthropos apteros* looking up in the sky and wishing to be a bird “[t]o whom such doubts must seem absurd.” Auden, “The Maze,” 237. Of course, if one were able to see the design of the maze the solution would be simple. Auden suggests that this is a failed solution and merely wishful thinking.

⁶ Manuel A. Vasquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 117.

⁷ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 26.

theological problem. Where is meaning found in ritual action? How is this meaning expressed in Christian communities?

Like Wittgenstein's search for meaning in the usage of words, there is a need to do the same for ritual action. His conviction that "[w]hat we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use,"⁸ moving away from the speculative and the theoretical, is a model for approaching ritual action. It eliminates the temptation to give or find meaning from the outside. Meaning has been present all along in lived expressions of human interaction and activity.⁹

Problematizing Ritual Theory

A practical theological lens offers a means to explore ritual action through the values stories, behaviors, and overall experience of religious practitioners in community.¹⁰ Practical theology offers an opportunity to move away from speculative theology and philosophy, and instead focus on concrete action. The basis for interpretation is that meaning is found in action itself and not from an external source.¹¹

⁸Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 48.

⁹ Wittgenstein claims that the role of philosophy is to put everything of study before the philosopher. What may be behind or outside such material is ultimately unhelpful for determining meaning. Wittgenstein says, "Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us... The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man [or woman] at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck him. – And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 50.

¹⁰ In Swinton and Mowat's words, "Practical Theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world." Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 6.

¹¹ Wittgenstein suggests that "[e]very sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life? In use it is alive." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 128. Ritual action is the lived language of its participants. The search for meaning outside action itself is a about a dead rather than a living language.

This is not how ritual action has been typically approached. Catherine Bell notes that ritual action may be separated from the conceptual aspects of religion, and hence treated as something secondary or arbitrary.¹² In this perspective, rituals simply act out concepts and beliefs, doing little to shape religious belief. Another approach separates ritual and action, making “a mechanism for integrating thought and action.”¹³ Ritual works to bridge the enormous gap that exists between beliefs and action. Ritual is the way “individual perception and behavior are socially appropriated or conditioned.”¹⁴ Such separate approaches treat ritual as a secondary object, separated from thought and belief.

Mircea Eliade represents these approaches. For him, myths and symbols provide a better picture of the religious experience than ritual. Ritual functions on a different level than symbols and myths. Ritual, being tied to the social, is arbitrary and bound to change, while the original symbol or myth stays the same.¹⁵ Sacred myths are the ultimate foundation for *homo religiosus*¹⁶ so the “[o]ne becomes truly a [human] only by conforming to the teaching of the myths, that is, by imitating the gods.”¹⁷ The acting out of myths is a sacred activity that brings one closer to the divine. The rituals are replaceable, but the foundational myths are not. Action is imitation and remembering, so

¹² Catherine Bell is especially critical of theoretical descriptions that treat ritual in this way. Beliefs are given priority over ritual turning it into “*thoughtless* action – routinized, habitual, obsessive, or mimetic – and therefore the purely formal, secondary, and mere physical expression of logically prior ideas.” Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 19.

¹³ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 20.

¹⁴ Bell cites Durkheim as an example of this kind of approach. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 20.

¹⁵ This is not only characteristic of Eliade, but of phenomenologists generally. As Bell notes, Phenomenologists saw “more stability, even eternity, in the structures underlying myth.” Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 10.

¹⁶ Eliade frequently uses this term to describe the religious person.

¹⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 100.

that the “whole religious life is a commemoration, a remembering.”¹⁸ Life is sacred because of its connection to a sacred origin. This sacred origin has to be reenacted again and again in order to connect to the transcendental realm. The sacred transcendental realm manifests itself in reality despite the historical circumstances. Consequently, action only has value to the extent that it manifests the transcendental realm.¹⁹ Ritual and reality are completely dependent on the myth, the conceptual, for its content. Beliefs reign supreme. Religion is a “secondary expression of these very beliefs, symbols, and ideas.”²⁰ Ritual as reenactment presents a top down model of religious experience. Both theologians and sociologists emphasize elements outside action or practice. For them ritual action has nothing to contribute to meaning and the practice of religion.

Clifford Geertz, sometimes considered a precursor to postmodernism,²¹ breaks from Eliade by bringing "semiotics, hermeneutics, and practice into the study of religion."²² Geertz moves away from ritual as reenactment. He instead focuses on the ways religious practices make meaning. Ritual practices requires one to make a “thick description”²³ in order to delve deeper into their meaning. He focuses exclusively on a semiotic analysis of ritual actions that "understands all human practices through the prism

¹⁸ Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 101.

¹⁹ For Eliade, everything is connected to the time of origins. The task of ritual action is to overcome and subdue the present moment. Meaning is not found in the present moment or with the religious participants. Rather, meaning is found in the past. Accessing the divine means ignoring the present in order to manifest the past. Eliade makes this clear when he says that “reactualizing sacred history, by imitating the divine behavior, [one] puts and keeps [oneself] close to the gods – that is the real and the significant.” Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane*, 202.

²⁰ Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 11.

²¹ Vasquez, *More than Belief*, 212.

²² Vasquez, *More than Belief*, 211.

²³ Clifford Geertz makes the case that a good interpretation of “anything – a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society – takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation. When it does not do that, but leads us instead somewhere else – into admiration of its own elegance, of its author's cleverness...it is something else than what the task at hand...calls for.” Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), 18.

of representation and signification."²⁴ Religion is reduced to an act of communicating and sharing meaningful information through its symbols. Interpretation of any ritual action is a manner of decoding its symbols. The practices and experiences that make of these symbols are secondary.²⁵

Geertz describes symbols as areas where meaning is stored. Ritual activity does not contain meaning in itself. Rituals dramatize the meaning contained within religious symbols.²⁶ Religious symbols create a system of meaning, which "seems to mediate genuine knowledge, knowledge of the essential conditions in terms of which life must, or necessity, be lived."²⁷ Thus religious symbols forms the social world view and creates ways in which these values are lived out. The force of these religious symbols is strong enough to eliminate human interpretation and preference in ritual. The subjective is sacrificed by an imposed structure.²⁸ In this view, religion is defined by symbols rather than action.²⁹ Symbols define meaningful action rather than practice. This results in a "one-dimensional view of religion."³⁰ Geertz's approach ultimately results in an excessive

²⁴ Vasquez, *More than Belief*, 212.

²⁵ Vasquez says that "Geertz reduces religion to signification, to its semiotic function, which becomes a precondition for meaningful practice. For Geertz, the power of religion is not in the situated practices that authorize it as an autonomous and efficacious field of human activity." Vasquez, *More than Belief*, 214.

²⁶ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 127.

²⁷ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 129.

²⁸ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 131. Geertz values religious symbols at the expense of human action and imagination. The meanings stored in symbol provide an objective, or universal, guideline for behavior. He suggests that all cultures desire the need for some factual basis in its religious commitments.

²⁹ Geertz's definition is built around symbols. He defines religion as "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [humans] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 90.

³⁰ Vasquez, *More than Belief*, 220.

amount of textualism that understands religious practices through social-scientific language.³¹

Geertz is not alone in his emphasis on symbols at the expense of action. Other well-known ritual theorists share the same perspective.³² Such an approach fails to see how “the relatively little attention paid to how rituals themselves change or to why a community’s sense of appropriate ritual changes.”³³ Ritual is a way of acting and doing certain activities, which distinguishes it from other behaviors. Ritual action is therefore a practice and “must be taken as a nonsynthetic and irreducible term for human activity.”³⁴ Ritual action is above all the practice of participants. As a practice, ritual action is comprised of certain defining characteristics.³⁵ These characteristics form a way of behavior, called ritualization,³⁶ which differentiates it from other actions. Ritual action, as ritualization, involves “nuanced contrasts and the evocation of strategic, value-laden distinctions.”³⁷

³¹ Vasquez criticizes Geertz for treating all religious activity as a text. Geertz's interpretative framework is based on the textuality of religious practices. As texts their symbolic systems are then able to be decoded in order to discover their meaning. While Vasquez is critical of Geertz's textual approach, he is not saying that action cannot be treated as a text. Vasquez is criticizing approaches that ground all action and behavior as a text, becoming "the alpha and omega of practices." Vasquez, *More than Belief*, 219..

³² Catherine Bell describes two general approaches toward ritual since the start of the twentieth century. The first approach examines the role of ritual in maintaining social groups. The second approach, which Geertz represents, examines the role ritual plays in adapting ideals and traditions to changing social conditions. Catherine Bell “Ritual, Change, and Changing Rituals,” in *Foundations in Ritual Studies: A Reader for Students of Christian Worship*, eds. Paul Bradshaw and John Mellow (London: SPCK, 2007), 168.

³³ Bell, “Ritual, Change, and Changing Rituals,” 168.

³⁴ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 81.

³⁵ Bell helpfully names the four features of practice as 1) situational, 2) strategic, 3) embedded in misrecognition, and 4) the will to act. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 80.

³⁶ Ritualization is defined by Bell as production of differentiation. It is a “way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful.” *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 89.

³⁷ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 89.

The way actions are deployed matter as much as the actions themselves. Symbolic heavy approaches miss this. When symbols are treated as systems of belief, analysis misses the strategic and nuanced nature of ritual action. Boundaries are blurred by the actions of everyday ritual actors. Ritual actors have a voice in how symbols and myths are employed. Ritualization does not merely act out a program. It involves complex interactions and exchanges with a multitude of behaviors.³⁸

Ritual marks out a difference between the ordinary and extraordinary in daily life, highlighting the way things could or should be.³⁹ It is an assertion of difference between the conflicting spheres of the everyday and the ritual. Ritual action is not a mechanical process, instead its improvisation and innovation uses the ordinary in extraordinary ways.⁴⁰ Ritual action is produced and characterized by this differentiation.⁴¹

Ritual action is more than a “negative by product or, one might say, waste product, immediately discarded, of the construction of the systems of objective

³⁸ Bell strongly advocates that “ritual should not be analyzed by being lifted out of the context formed by other ways of acting in a cultural situation. Acting ritual is first and foremost a matter of nuanced contrasts and the evocation of strategic, value-laden distinctions.” Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 89. If understanding ritual were simply a matter of studying symbolic systems field work would never be necessary.

³⁹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 109.

⁴⁰ Smith makes the case that ritual thrives in difference and improvisation. Ritual “precises ambiguities; it neither overcomes nor relaxes them. Ritual, concerned primarily with difference, is, necessarily, an affair of the relative...In ritual, the differences can be extreme, or they can be reduced to microdistinctions – but they can never be overthrown. The system can never come to rest.” Smith, *To Take Place*, 110. Ritual action is more concerned with the creation of difference between the everyday and the religious, not with acting out a symbolic system.

⁴¹ Bell and Smith seem to be in agreement that ritual is a way of acting that is different from ordinary everyday behavior. Bell says that ritualization “involves the very drawing, in and through activity itself, of a privileged distinction between way of acting, specifically between those acts being performed and those being contrasted, mimed, or implicated somehow...ritualization is a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful.” Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 90. Ritual action is made possible by the participants. Though sacred space and objects hold great value in their ability to convey the sacred, these things would remain silent without ritual actors.

relations.”⁴² Practice is never accidental or reducible as structuralism and other objectivistic approaches would have it. The practice of action is the key to its meaning.⁴³

Ritual action cannot be rendered a mere theoretical object. The objectification of ritual separates it from action. Once abstracted, it suffers at hands of the universal. The search for universally acceptable definitions of ritual distorts and undercuts meanings already visible in the ritual. Such a search for universals only confuses, creating a need for further categories “to account for all the data that do not fit neatly into the domain of the original term.”⁴⁴ Ritual action is then dominated by a search for universal definitions. The search for meaning turns from ritual action and instead looks at everything besides the ritual itself. As the search moves further and further away from ritual action, greater leaps of logic and rational thinking are needed to account for anomalies.⁴⁵

The Postliberal Problem

The emphasis on universalizing approaches is not limited to ritual theorists. Theologians are notorious for preferring doctrines and models that minimize participant action and experience. For example, George A. Lindbeck proposes a “cultural linguistic model” with the intent on showing how religion resembles a language and culture. The function of religion is to provide a construction of reality that shapes social behavior and

⁴² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 24.

⁴³ Bourdieu is very candid about the limits of semiotics, linguistics, and other structuralist approaches. He claims that “Saussurian linguistics privileges the *structure* of signs, that is, the relations between them, at the expense of the *practical functions*, which are never reducible, as structuralism tacitly assumes, to functions of communication or knowledge. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 24.

⁴⁴ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 70.

⁴⁵ Thus Bell claims that “a good deal of writing about ritual involves extensive exercise in cleaning up all the data and terms that are not included in the main definition.” Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 69. Theology, in particular, seems to thrive on cleaning up data and terms that do not fit in neat categories.

experience. This approach asserts that doctrines function best in their use, and “not as expressive symbols or truth claims.”⁴⁶ In Lindbeck's case, use means that doctrines are “communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.”⁴⁷ But this is not use at all. Such an approach pays lip service to action and shifts power to the conceptual. This approach makes doctrine regulative and not propositional. Doctrine regulates truth but somehow makes no truth claim itself.⁴⁸

Religious experience is thus secondary to doctrine. In a cultural linguistic approach, innovation and change occurs through the ways doctrines interact with contemporary culture as opposed to the experiences of participants. As religion interacts with culture, numerous innovations and changes develop causing “anomalies”⁴⁹ within the system. The job of doctrines, when prophetically employed, is to renew the system in light of contemporary culture. This renewal eliminates anomalies, shifting focus to “objectivities of the religion.”⁵⁰ Ritual action is stripped of its ability to mold and shape religious belief. It becomes futile to search for meaning within ritual action or any embodied feature of religion. Theological doctrine provides the answers to contemporary problems, while other features of religion are accidental by products.⁵¹

⁴⁶ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 18.

⁴⁷ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 18.

⁴⁸ Lindbeck shifts power to doctrines by arguing that “[d]octrines regulate truth claims by excluding some and permitting others, but the logic of their communally authoritative use hinders or prevents them from specifying positively what is to be affirmed.” Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 19.

⁴⁹ Lindbeck points to the embodied aspects of religion, religious practice and belief, as being the source of anomalies. When religious practices interact with contemporary culture, it produces “negative effects, negative experiences.” Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 39.

⁵⁰ This is in place of religious experience and experience, which Lindbeck calls “secondary and tertiary in a linguistic-cultural model.” Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 39.

⁵¹ Lindbeck makes this abundantly clear when he alleges that “stories, myths, and doctrines... imprint their answers through rites, instruction, and other socializing processes, not only on the conscious mind but in the individual and cultural subconscious.” Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 40.

Lindbeck does assert that meaning is in religion and not outside it. As such, understanding is found in how religion uses and shapes the social. He largely agrees with Geertz that the interpretation of religion should not be separated from its use in life. Symbolic systems should not be applied generally toward understanding religious cultures. Therefore, it is the job of theologians to move from the abstract, towards a thick description⁵² that explores the full range of interpretative mediums. Theologians should use their imaginative and inventive abilities in order to “explore how a language, culture, or religion may be employed to give meaning to new domains of thought, reality, and action.”⁵³

This approach fails in its application. Lindbeck uses what he calls an “intratextual” approach that emphasizes the scriptural story over against the “propositional or experiential-expressive.”⁵⁴ Religious systems constitute a specific language or “text” that fits into “systems of communication or purposeful action.”⁵⁵ The focus on religion as a text is important, but Lindbeck fails to go through with what he purposes. Instead, his conception of intratextuality is limited to “relatively fixed canons

Lindbeck’s approach is strictly linear, with movement clearly moving one way. The job of ritual is to enact doctrines that have been imprinted both consciously and subconsciously.

⁵² Borrowing from Gilbert Ryle, Geertz describes thick description as exploring the “multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another...which he [or she] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.” Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 10.

⁵³ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 115. Inventive and imaginative approach should be affirmed. However, both Lindbeck and Geertz’s approaches are one-sided. They look only at what symbols or doctrines do to contemporary religious culture. Ethnographers and theologians are to describe what shape these symbols and doctrines take in the present. The voices of those who enact the symbols and doctrines in ritual action. How are these religious participants generating meaning through ritual action? Are participants simply repacking existing forms, or actively moving beyond them towards something new?

⁵⁴ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 114.

⁵⁵ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 114.

of writings.”⁵⁶ By the text, he literally means the primacy of scripture over experience or action. Scripture describes and defines experience. Hence, there is no correlation between contemporary experience and doctrine. Scripture absorbs and overrides everything.⁵⁷

As an interpretative framework, scripture is placed into a position of power. It redefines the meaning of experience and action into scriptural categories. This approach is so one-sided that there is literally nothing is outside the text, including history!⁵⁸ The reader is to conform to the biblical narrative, specifically the narrative depiction of Jesus Christ.

The most obvious problem is the supposed objectivity of determining what scripture says.⁵⁹ This dismisses action and experience in favor of an imposed private language.⁶⁰ Ironically, Lindbeck fails to see this in his use of Wittgenstein. In his strict adherence to the printed text, he fails to see that there is no such thing as use in and for

⁵⁶ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 116. Here Lindbeck suggests that religions without a fixed canon of scripture are inherently inadequate for meeting contemporary challenge. His idea of intratextuality completely ignores religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which do not value or use religious texts as do Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

⁵⁷ Lindbeck suggests that the “scriptural world is thus able to absorb the universe. It supplies the interpretive framework within which believer seek to live their lives and understand reality.” Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 117.

⁵⁸ Lindbeck describes an intratextual reading as an attempt “to derive the interpretive framework that designates the theologically controlling sense from the literary structure of the text itself.” Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 120. At first glance this seems similar to Jacques Derrida’s famous statement that “There is nothing outside of the text.” Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976), 158. Derrida says there is no referent outside the text. Lindbeck claims the complete opposite. The text is the ultimate referent for understanding God and Jesus Christ. Where Derrida is trying to open up texts, Lindbeck closes them.

⁵⁹ Lindbeck presents an almost naïve view that a text simply “says” what it means. Hans-Georg Gadamer writes that anyone “who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He [or she] projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2006), 269. Can a text truly “speak” on its own?

⁶⁰ Lindbeck claims that the experiential-expressivists approach, citing Lonergan, Rahner, and Tracy, employ a private language because experience is private. Yet he fails to see how a cultural-linguistic system, such as a religious text, can become a private language. His denial that new experiences can bring religious change or innovation makes his approach the private one. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 38-39. His approach fosters key questions. What about collective action and experience? Are not experiences shared and brought together through ritual?

itself. Use cannot be isolated outside of experience and action. Texts cannot be used without the individual and communal experiences that give it life. Experiential-expressivist approaches risk becoming private languages⁶¹, but the public nature of theology makes this impossible.⁶²

The intratextual approach eliminates the public nature of theological discourse, and minimizes action and experience. Intratextuality effectively removes theology's ability to be used. When a text absorbs the world, there is space for one story only. Words, or texts, do not work that way. A word cannot be given a precise definition that can cover all varieties of its use. Several definitions can be put together that can be roughly applied to a word, but the use of a word cannot be tied to a universal rule.⁶³ One cannot eliminate the "blurred edges,"⁶⁴ of words. As such, a single definition of a word is difficult to determine. In order to clarify a word's meaning, the specific context of its use

⁶¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 94, 96.

⁶² David Tracy writes, "The theocentric character of any genuinely theological statement, whether explicitly or implicitly addressed, drives every theologian to claims to truth which demand publicness and, at the limit, universality. The possibility of a strictly private language, even aside from the notorious logical difficulties with that incept noted by Wittgenstein, are rendered theologically impossible by the very nature of the claims to meaning and truth entailed by the radical monotheism of the Western religious traditions. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 80.

⁶³ Wittgenstein makes it very clear that meaning is found in how words are used. Thus, Lindbeck fails to adequately explore inadequacies in his intratextual approach. Wittgenstein uses several examples to make his point. When one hears a word what images come to mind? For example, what does one imagine when one hears the word "cube?" What happens when one points to a triangular prism instead of a regular hexahedron? How does interpretation and usage change the way words and images are perceived? Wittgenstein allows for the possibility to use words differently. There are other processes involved that cannot be accounted for, meaning that there is no picture that can force a particular application. He concludes that "[w]hat is essential is to see that the same thing can come before our mind when we hear a word and application still be different. Has it the same meaning both times? I think we shall say not." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 55.

⁶⁴ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 71.

needs be found.⁶⁵ Action and experience cannot be ignored because “[e]very sign *by itself* seems dead. *What gives it life? In use it is alive.*”⁶⁶

Failure to take an account of action and experience unbalances theological discourse. It becomes forgetful of the role contemporary culture has in shaping theology.⁶⁷ Scripture does not absorb the world. Correlation is necessary between the two poles of contemporary culture and scripture. In neglecting contemporary culture,⁶⁸ theology loses all accountability, resulting in “dangerous consequences.”⁶⁹ Lindbeck remains firmly entrenched on one pole, creating a theological vacuum that ignores how people use scripture and doctrine. His theological project eliminates any role for apologetics.⁷⁰ He ignores the variety of ways people approach, use, and adapt scripture and doctrine. A “one size fits all” approach is inconceivable when the theological starting points differ for each individual and group.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the ‘Philosophical Investigations’* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 5.

⁶⁶ Wittgenstein immediately follows up this statement with “[i]s life breathed into it there? – Or is the use in its life?” *Philosophical Investigations*, 128. This is a fair question for Lindbeck. What gives meaning to scripture and doctrine? Does something outside human activity and experience breathe life into them? Perhaps what makes scripture so engaging is its use in ritual action. Its life comes from the inside, not the outside.

⁶⁷ Paul Tillich describes contemporary culture as “the creative interpretation of existence, an interpretation which is carried on in every period of history under all kinds of psychological and sociological conditions.” Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 4.

⁶⁸ Tillich describes this as the scientific and artistic, the economic, political, and ethical forms in which they express their interpretation of existence. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3-4. The situation is comprised of the actions and behaviors of people. It is their activities that make up contemporary life.

⁶⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume I*, 5.

⁷⁰ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 45.

⁷¹ Browning finds this especially troubling. Lindbeck does not even consider the roles race, ethnicity, and history have in theological interpretation. Browning says that “[p]eople living in modern pluralistic societies have a variety of confessional beginning points. If they are Christians or are in some way attempting to consult Christian classics, they tend to bring questions engendered by the conflict of their contemporary practices with these classics.” Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 45. Ritual action should also be considered a theological starting point. How one uses scripture and doctrine is important in interpretation.

Beyond scriptural and doctrinal interpretation, postliberalism problematizes the search for meaning in ritual action. It imposes an "underlying body of rules or patterned order to which the theology of practice conforms despite its messiness."⁷² It is a matter of keeping religious participants and ritual action under strict control. Since postliberalism projects its own rules, nothing new can be learned from religious practitioners. Ritual action has no apparent meaning until the theologian describes it. Even so, the only meanings one will find are within the underlying body of rules imposed by academic theologians.⁷³ Religious participants are oddly held hostage by a body of rules projected by academic theologians. Practitioners cannot know what they are doing until told by a theologian. Such universalizing rules constitute a way of acting that all Christians should follow. If there are disagreements, right practice and training are to resolve them. When it comes to studying religious practices, only those determined by the theologically competent matter.⁷⁴

Postliberalism is anti-correlational. It negates and discourages conversation, imagining that practitioners are "listening to our religious narratives and hearing them and only them."⁷⁵ By ignoring contemporary culture, postliberalism distorts the very narrative it is trying to uphold. It places the scriptural narrative against the narratives of

⁷² Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 76.

⁷³ Tanner reasons that post-liberalism "projects on the object studied what its own procedures of investigation requires - a coherent whole. The method of study itself thereby validates the conclusions of the theologian while disqualifying the people and practices it studies from posing a challenge to those conclusions." Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 76.

⁷⁴ This is especially troubling for Tanner. Postliberalism judges who is theologically competent. She writes that an "[a]ppeal to competence simply seems therefore to be a rather underhanded way of supporting one faction in an ongoing argument over what Christians should say and do. Rather than allowing a fair fight that might eventually produce agreement in judgments, the very competency of the majority of the players to make such judgments is questioned." Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 142.

⁷⁵ Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 46.

historical subjects. Subjects are rendered invisible against a "backdrop made up of nothing but systems and structures."⁷⁶ The disappearing subjects are religious practitioners whose voices, experiences, and actions are rendered mute. Theology is more than a handful of experts who pass down a subjectless doctrine. Religious practitioners ought to play an active role in shaping meaning through their experiences and ritual actions.⁷⁷ Narrative should enable religious practitioners to become subjects by forming their own identity.⁷⁸

The postliberal approach sacrifices the memories and narratives of subjects, and replaces them with an imposed scriptural narrative. Being an extrascriptural category, ritual action is erased by this scriptural absorption of the world. Lindbeck's postliberal approach has no room for the experiences, and thus the stories, found in ritual action.⁷⁹ Ritual action and experience are problematized as anomalies to be overcome. In seeking to absorb the world, an imposed theology erases story and memory. It does so in the name of a transcendental or outside category. People are prevented from claiming their full identities as subjects.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Herder and Herder, 2007), 67.

⁷⁷ Metz strongly criticizes approaches that do theology from the outside. He maintains that theology should be concerned about who asks theology questions and why. He says, "[w]ho does theology? Where? Which is to say, with whom, and in whose interests? That is, for whom?...It seems to me very important that *theology* pose these questions to itself and that they not be merely imposed on it from the outside, mostly motivated by ideology critique." Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 68.

⁷⁸ As opposed to Lindbeck who says that "[i]ntratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories." Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 118. This begs the questions: what "extrascriptural categories" are left out?

⁷⁹ According to Lindbeck, the scriptural story erases all other stories. He suggests that believers ought not to find their story in scripture, instead they should "make the story of the Bible their story." Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

⁸⁰ Metz considers this a grave error. It is theology done on behalf of the victors, and ignores the oppressed whose identities are subsequently erased. Metz suggests that the "destruction of memory turns out systematically to hinder identity, to prevent people from becoming subjects or continuing to be subjects in their social-historical contexts." Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 75.

Postliberalism and methods that emphasize scripture at the expense of community fail as approaches to ritual action. They sacrifice communal and individual experience and actions for the sake of an imposed outside perspective. Participants in ritual action are denied their own voice and engagement with scripture.

Metaphysical Problematizing of Ritual Action

Metaphysics⁸¹ has historically been used as a foundation for human knowledge and activity. Not surprisingly, theologians have used metaphysics, or onto-theology,⁸² as a way to provide a suitable foundation for ritual actions. In such a perspective, action is explained away as a sign for a reality beyond experience.⁸³ The history and criticism of metaphysics is well documented.⁸⁴

John Milbank offers a contemporary call to Christian metaphysics. He treats scriptures as the foundation for all knowledge and values. The role of theology is to articulate this vision through a social critique that denies any correlation or engagement with culture. Theology does not simply articulate the Christian faith. It actively challenges all areas of culture.⁸⁵ Complete power is given to theology, so much so that it has no need to confer with any discipline or perspective outside of itself.

⁸¹ The definition of metaphysics being used here draws on Vattimo's description of the "belief in an order of being as stable, necessary, and objectively knowable foundation." Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 23.

⁸² Westphal writes, "The onto-theological project commits the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. It abstracts the cognitive dimension of the religious life and gives it essential primacy." Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 17.

⁸³ Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane* 202.

⁸⁴ For an introduction of onto-theology see Merold Westphal's *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 1-12.

⁸⁵ Smith describes this as a "distinctly theological engagement with the world-and the academy that investigates this world-undergirded by the belief that the way to engage the contemporary world is not by trying to demonstrate a correlation between the gospel and cultural values but rather letting the gospel confront these (apostate) values...[Radical Orthodoxy] is not simply a theology but a comprehensive

In *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank critiques modernity, enlightenment, and liberalism, replacing them entirely with theology. Milbank claims social theory emerged as a rival to Christian theology, a counter-metaphysics.⁸⁶ Sociology supposedly displaces traditional metaphysics and theology, and replaces it with "a new metaphysics which lays claim to a totalizing and once-for-all representation of finitude."⁸⁷ Any attempt to understand the social outside theology is thus a failed attempt to replace one with another. As such, the concept of the social is an artificial idea, made precisely to control Christianity.⁸⁸ Theology's acceptance of sociology's explanations have led to the sidelining of Christianity. Perhaps more importantly, the theologian's job has become one of apologetics and "exercise[s] in damage limitation."⁸⁹ Milbank concludes that sociology has no vantage point to observe religious behavior. There is nothing sociology can contribute that is not itself metaphysical and based on faith.⁹⁰

Milbank is not entirely wrong. Sociology can abstract ritual action away from its lived expression. Sociology can turn a ritual action into an unnecessary academic problem. In attempting to decode ritual actions, scholars impart their own epistemology onto religious practitioners. When ritual actions are turned into "things" the lived context

Christian account of every aspect of the world." James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 69.

⁸⁶ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 106.

⁸⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 106.

⁸⁸ Milbank even goes so far as to doubt the very idea of the social. He claims that "in retracing the genesis of sociology I have opened the way, not denying 'reduction to the social,' but rather casting doubt on the very idea of there being something 'social' (in a specific, technical sense) to which religious behavior *could be* in any sense referred." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 102.

⁸⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 101.

⁹⁰ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 112.

of ritual action is forgotten. Ritual action is reduced to its function and is merely re-described by the narratives of sociologist.⁹¹

The function of ritual action is left to deal with *lacunae* within social systems. This confines religion to socially constructed liminal and the supernatural spaces. A modern perspective reads its own interpretation onto ritual action, limiting its role to transitions and initiations. When sociologists attempt to identify the essence of religion, they reconstitute religious action and behavior in their own image. Milbank identifies the history of sociology as an interpretation that "superimposes on all history a modern perspective for which religion concerns a suprarational, existential sphere."⁹² The role of religion role is confined as a marker between the sacred and profane.

Sociology can impose an outside narrative on ritual action and the religious experience. It is not clear that boundaries can be given to mark ritual action and the everyday.⁹³ His justifiable concern that an outside source has imposed its own narrative on ritual action notwithstanding, goes too far.⁹⁴ He assumes that the sociology of religion

⁹¹ Milbank uses the example of the Eucharist to make this point. He reasons that when a sociologist attempts to explain the Eucharist, "one mentally splits what is only one item into three: so that, rather like a bad theologian, one thinks of the eucharist as a reified 'something in itself' apart from what it does; then one refers what it does, its function, to an ecclesial community thought of in abstraction from all the sets of collective actions, including the eucharist, which alone give it any reality." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 111.

⁹² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 124.

⁹³ Milbank claims that "it is impossible to specify with sufficient precision a residually universal 'everydayness', so too it is not universally clear that practices and beliefs considered 'religious' are separate from socially fundamental techniques of prediction and control over things and persons, nor that one can draw an easy line in every society between inventions truly believed in, an imaginings merely 'entertained'." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 130.

⁹⁴ This is clearly evident when he boldly proclaims that "I am going to show how all twentieth-century sociology of religion can be exposed as a secular policing of the sublime. Deconstructed in this fashion, the entire subject evaporates into the pure ether of the secular will-to-power." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 106.

originated with a desire to explain away religion.⁹⁵ His belief that all sociology is a secular faith or positivist theology is itself reductionism.⁹⁶

More problematically, he replaces the "metaphysics" he finds in sociology with a theological metaphysics. Theology becomes the ultimate metaphysics and medium of the Christian world-view. It becomes theology's task to take up all the questions of metaphysics. As such, theology replaces philosophy and sociology. Theology alone becomes the true science and seeker of truth.⁹⁷ In his appropriation of Blondel, Milbank moves theology from contemplation to action. Action requires revelation in a "divine-human mediator"⁹⁸ in order to be conveyed in the church. He affirms that supernatural grace is always present in action. The supernatural is not only required in action, but is always present in the continual mediation of practiced action.⁹⁹

While Milbank affirms Blondel, his argument is fundamentally different from Blondel's and goes far beyond it. Milbank does not give complete autonomy to action: his view of action is carefully controlled by tradition.¹⁰⁰ Without theology, the practice of

⁹⁵ Gill explains that early social scientists "were concerned to provide explanations of the origins and function of religion, but both Durkheim and Freud claimed at various points that this was not tantamount to 'explaining away' religion, whatever their own personal religious beliefs." Robin Gill, *Theology in a Social Context: Sociological Theology: Volume I* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 33.

⁹⁶ Gill suggests that Milbank "appears to believe that the very fact that sociologists of religion seek social determinants of all human behaviour commits them to the view that religion must be 'explained away'." Gill, *Theology in a Social Context*, 32.

⁹⁷ In conversation with Maurice Blondel, Milbank makes this clear by stating "[i]t is theology, rather, and not philosophy which explains things, which discovers reality as mediating action, which is alone certainty, alone science..." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 218.

⁹⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 217.

⁹⁹ Milbank explains this as the "always particular self-supplementation of action, in the continuous eccentricities of a serial tradition, and perfect act of mediation, which is accomplished in deeds which remain as signs and are repeated in 'literal practice'. Every human action – says Blondel, the philosopher – is prophetic of Christ, or secretly refers to him." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 217.

¹⁰⁰ Milbank distinguishes himself from Blondel by stating that "the logic of action alone cannot, as Blondel taught, decipher action as love. Only allegiance to a particular series of actions, or a particular tradition, does this." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 218. Following this argument, only theology can decipher action as love. One can already see the outsized role Milbank gives to theological discourse.

action drifts towards nihilism. He agrees that ontological questions are only answered in practice, but by this he means that only the practice of theology can seriously answer these questions. Only when Blondel's philosophy is reinterpreted as theology can it stand.¹⁰¹

Action is Milbank's proposed way to move beyond the secular reason of the social sciences. His central claim is that a renewed focus on action can escape the illusion of being able to describe things in their totality. Action allows for the Christian opening of mystery and the supernatural in the everyday. However, it is not clear that Milbank actually holds this view. He seems to have fallen into the same trap as the social scientists he criticizes. His approach is a "theological policing of the sublime." That is, while he praises action as a means for theological reflection, he shuns any method for doing so. Instead, theology is constructed as the ultimate narrative, displacing all other narratives and approaches of interpretation.¹⁰² As an ultimate narrative, theology cannot be tested against action. Theology is supposedly its own practice, a unification of theory and practice in one unified movement.¹⁰³ This has a superficial similarity to Don Browning's preferred approach, but in a totally different direction.¹⁰⁴ There is no correlation between

¹⁰¹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 218-219.

¹⁰² Milbank believes that theology "purports to give an ultimate narrative, to provide some ultimate depth of description, because situating of oneself within such a continuing narrative is what it means to belong to the Church, because the situating of oneself within such a continuing narrative is what it means to belong to the Church, to be a Christian." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 253. That is, theology does not need any mediation to extract meaning: theology mediates itself. Yet who does the mediating?

¹⁰³ Milbank declares that there "is no priority of *praxis*, but instead a single, seamless, theory/practice which has one privileged canonical moment, one canonical binding in words, and many lesser normative points of reference." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 256. Meaning that it refers only to itself. Theology eliminates any correlation between theory and practice, becoming an untestable theory that eliminates any need to seek meaning from action.

¹⁰⁴ Browning makes the case that all practices are theory-laden. He says "[a]ll our practices, even our religious practices, have theories behind and within them." Browning, *A Fundamental Practical*

the practice of ritual action and theology. Milbank claims he will "explicate the narrative of Christian action as itself the primary account for theology of socio-historic processes, which therefore makes theology itself possible."¹⁰⁵ Theology simply subverts the practice of action he claims to praise.

Milbank positions theology as a social science so as to return theology to its presumed rightful position as queen of the sciences. With no other field of knowledge adequate for dialogue, theology becomes its own dialogue partner. With no other voices to challenge theological theory, theology reestablishes itself as a new metaphysics. It does so through the voice of the church.¹⁰⁶ Theology is purged of any need of apologetics, or conversation with other disciplines. Instead the role of theology is to proclaim the Christian metanarrative as a counter-history.

As a counter-history, theology turns toward history and tradition in order to recreate history from a Christian point of view. Theology creates its own history in order to counter the supposedly created secular history.¹⁰⁷ This counter-history also describes a counter-ethics, exposing Christianity "as not just different, but as *the* difference from all

Theology, 6. Thus for both Milbank and Browning theology brings together theory and practice. However, Browning proposes a correlation model, something Milbank strongly opposes.

¹⁰⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 256. Milbank's claim for Christian practice to be the primary source for theology is admirable. It is thus all the more regrettable that he does not follow up this proposal, despite promises to do so. Instead Milbank surrenders action to the supernatural and replaces it with a metanarrative.

¹⁰⁶ Milbank describes the Church as "*already*, necessarily, by virtue of its institution, a 'reading' of other human societies, it becomes possible to consider ecclesiology as also a 'sociology'." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 382. Theology not only establishes the Church as a "sociology," but makes it the measurement for all human activity.

¹⁰⁷ Milbank advocates a "re-narration of Christian emergence, a story which only constitutes itself as a story by re-narrating previous stories, both of past history, and of the relation of creation to Godhead...to think theology as a social science, one must first of all sketch out a 'counter-history' of ecclesial origination, which tells the story of all history from the point of view of this emergence." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 383. Apparently, Milbank is dissatisfied with history and seeks to make his own.

other cultural systems, which it exposes as threatened by incipient nihilism."¹⁰⁸ This Christian metanarrative, as constructed by Milbank, absorbs and regulates all narratives. It is the real history, constituting all other histories as false.¹⁰⁹

There is no room for any other action or experience to say otherwise. He advocates a metanarrative that absorbs and eliminates anything learned through ritual action. Theology is given the power to critique all other competing narratives. It is the ultimate social event. Theology is to interpret all social action. The theological metanarrative, as the ideal narrative, shows how all other social events come up short in comparison.¹¹⁰

This critique of all human history renders the social event Milbank espouses mute under the weight of orthodoxy. No room is left for meaning to be expressed through ritual action. He evacuates meaning from religious participation. Religious participants are simply required to play the role theological doctrine has prescribed for them. As such, theology has no need to address contemporary culture. Meaning gained from action and experience is considered an anathema, and the orthodox belief of a small few prevails.

¹⁰⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 383.

¹⁰⁹ Even Christian narratives outside the established "orthodox" boundaries are considered false. Milbank thinks that there must be a metanarrative. As such it "is the genesis of the Church, outside which context one could only have an ahistorical gnostic Christ." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 389.

¹¹⁰ Milbank writes that the "*logic* of Christianity involves the claim that the 'interruption' of history by Christ and his bride, the Church, is the most fundamental of events, interpreting all other events. And it is *most especially* a social event, able to interpret other social formations, because it compares them with its own new social practice." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 390. Does this effectively hijack Caputo's use of the term "event" by proposing a counter-event to the postmodern one? More problematic is Milbank's use of the phrase "social event" to describe Christian metanarrative. His strong emphasis on "social" implies the importance on action in expressing the Christian narrative. Despite his emphasis on the social, Milbank never seems to grasp the importance action and experience have in understanding and dialoguing with the Christian narrative. His denial of any role for the social sciences leaves one with a highly mediated and controlled social event.

Theology divorces itself from the expression of faith and creates for itself a circular metanarrative metaphysics.¹¹¹

Milbank's insistence on a Christian metanarrative is itself highly dubious, based on the assumption that such a metanarrative does not have contradictory readings.¹¹² The universal metanarrative is no longer sustainable.¹¹³ The narrative Milbank attempts to universalize does not exist. As language games, narratives continually develop and change over time. Authority is given to a phantom theology that does not correspond to how language and narrative actually work. No language, not even a Christian one, is a static entity that can be imposed as a social event within Christian theology. Rather time, experience, and practice all have a role in how language is used.¹¹⁴ It is impossible to bracket language apart from culture and other knowledge. New languages are continually added to old ones. One simply cannot bracket a narrative the way Milbank proposes. Narratives constantly interpenetrate and interact with each other by way of new

¹¹¹ Pattison is especially critical of Radical Orthodoxy. He reasons that there is "little attempt to relate this version of theology to contemporary human needs, so that it is not in fact evangelical. What we have here, then, is a species of theology which is humanly irrelevant, religiously uninteresting and rationally indefensible as a publicly supported enterprise within the academy." Stephen Pattison, *The Challenge of Practical Theology: Selected Essays* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), 219.

¹¹² This is Robert Schreier's critique. He shows that Milbank goes too far in his universalization of the Christian narrative. He also worries about who has a right to tell the narrative in new circumstances. Schreier is clearly doubtful that such a unified Christian narrative exists. See Robert Schreier, "From Postmodernity to Countermodernity: John Milbank's Undertaking," in *The 1994 annual of hermeneutics & social concern*, ed. Justus George Lawler (New York: Continuum, 1994).

¹¹³ This is Lyotard's thesis. The belief in a metanarrative is no longer a credible idea. He makes the case that the "grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation." Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), 37.

¹¹⁴ Wittgenstein describes the complexity of language as an "ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 9. Milbank's city would probably look like the straight and clean streets of suburbia. Its only inhabitants would be theologians.

knowledge, action, and experience. No universal metanarrative can stand apart and critique all others.¹¹⁵ This is not what narratives do, metanarrative or not.

Milbank's proposed metaphysics privileges doctrine and suppresses the voices of ritual participants. Christian practice is thus reduced to a mere enactment of metanarrative. Meaning is enforced by an imposed orthodoxy. Ritual action is a repetition of orthodoxy.¹¹⁶ Since meaning is found elsewhere in authoritative doctrines, ritual action is finally ignored.

The privilege of authority is the main problem with any metaphysics. An outside source is considered legitimate while the perspectives that come from practice are removed.¹¹⁷ Foundational positions inevitably lead to an intellectual authoritarianism.¹¹⁸ Something seemingly contrary to the Christian gospel narrative. Milbank's claim pushes theology dangerously close to absolutizing truth. As an absolute truth, his theology seeks

¹¹⁵ Lyotard describes several ways language has splintered, including many new scientific languages. He says that "nobody speaks all of those languages, they have no universal metalanguage...the diminished tasks of research have become compartmentalized and no one can master them all. Speculative or humanistic philosophy is forced to relinquish its legitimation duties, which explains why philosophy is facing a crisis wherever it persists in arrogating such functions and is reduced to the study of systems of logic or the history of ideas where it has been realistic enough to surrender them." Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 41.

¹¹⁶ Milbank clearly defines the role of Christian practice and action. He believes that "Christian belief belongs to Christian practice, and it sustains its affirmations about God and creation only by repeating and enacting a metanarrative about how God speaks in the world in order to redeem it." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 429.

¹¹⁷ This is Vattimo's argument. He maintains that "metaphysics must be rejected, not because it fails to include the subject of the theory and is thus incomplete but because it legitimates, with its objectivism, a social and historical order from which the liberty and originality of human existence have been erased." See Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 30.

¹¹⁸ Vattimo writes "philosophy can no longer speak from a foundational point of view. If it does adopt, even only implicitly, such a point of view, it exposes itself to the consequence of having to make its own efficacy depend on an alliance with a prince, ancient or modern, meaning on some form of authoritarianism." Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 40. Like philosophy, Milbank's theology seeks credibility through its alliance with Platonism and Augustinism.

submission, not correlation, with ritual actors.¹¹⁹ At a purely practical level, this theology clashes with a "culture that largely rejects the very notion of foundation or ground, at any rate when the problem is posed in sufficiently explicit terms."¹²⁰ Those within contemporary culture are simply not interested in the return of metanarratives, no matter how shrilly they are proclaimed.¹²¹

Overcoming Problems in Ritual Action

Ritual action may be interpreted from multiple perspectives including semiotics, post-liberalism, and metaphysics. Such approaches problematize and minimize the role of ritual action in expressing meaning. Perspective needs to be shifted back to religious participants as the primary actors and meaning makers. To do that, meaning should be refocused toward ritual action rather than an external source. This requires several approaches, the first of which is hermeneutics.

¹¹⁹ Vattimo considers this a dangerous course of action for Christianity. The search for stable forms of knowledge makes religion a form of control. He writes that this desire is "because we want to obtain some effect or demonstrate it authoritatively and lastingly to others. Anyone claiming to tell me the absolute truth is demanding from me unquestioning submission." Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 77.

¹²⁰ Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 50.

¹²¹ Schreier questions Milbank's ability to assert such a narrative between two different traditions. He thinks that Milbank's position is "much like the attitude of the British tourist abroad who believes that if one just speaks English loudly enough, it will be understood." Schreier, "From Postmodernity to Countermodernity," 303.

Chapter Two: Hermeneutics and Ritual Action

Who is like the wise man?

And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

Wisdom makes one's face shine,

*And the hardness of one's countenance is changed?*¹²²

The Difficulty of Interpretation

Interpretation is never an easy task. It discerns and explores the heart of people and their actions. Meaning is not self-evident. Instead it may appear self-contradictory or completely absent. The complexities of human action and behavior do not always lend themselves to clear and apparent meanings. This is especially so for religious meaning. It is a truism to say that religious texts and actions are difficult to discern. There is a need for interpretation that delves into the heart of practice and respects the integrity of such practices. Interpretation that takes seriously the content being interpreted is needed, without recourse to something outside action itself.

All narrative or literary objects are estranged from their author and context. It is futile to attempt a reconstruction of the original world or its author.¹²³ Estrangement functions on many levels and is a major barrier in interpretation. Historical distancing is

¹²² *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), Ecc. 8:1.

¹²³ Gadamer and Ricoeur are both critical of methods of interpretation that attempt to reconstruct the original world of the text. Gadamer describes how Fredrick Schleiermacher's attempt to "understand a writer better than he understood himself [or herself]...[Schleiermacher] sees the act of understanding as the reconstruction of the production." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Wensheimer and Donald G. Marshall (Continuum: London, 2004), 191. Ricoeur suggests that "[w]hat the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant; henceforth, textual meaning and psychological meaning have different destinies." Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 139.

an ongoing process that makes the job of interpretation never complete.¹²⁴ All objects of interpretation, once born, are affected by history. The written word, the delivered speech, and the enacted ritual are immediately subjected to distancing.¹²⁵

Interpreters are not immune to this distancing effect. All interpreters are effected by history and thus separation with one's historical situation is impossible.¹²⁶ The interpretative situation is one of standing on the precipice of an ever growing chasm. Interpretation of the original work and the author retreats further in the distance with each passing generation. Interpretation becomes guesswork. It becomes difficult to determine the meaning of the original situation and its application to the present. Recognition of one's situation and horizon are thus immensely important. Finitude is always a barrier in interpretation. No one has the luxury of seeing all the factors involved in interpretation.¹²⁷ The act of interpretation is one of continually coming up short. This limit is what is

¹²⁴ Historical distancing affects all finite objects of interpretation. Gadamer writes that “the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process. Not only are fresh sources of error constantly excluded, so that all kinds of things are filtered out that obscure the true meaning; but new sources of understanding are continually merging that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 298. Since historical distancing cannot be overcome, interpretation is an ongoing process.

¹²⁵ “Distance, then is not simply a fact, a given, just the actual spatial and temporal gap between us and the appearance of such and such work of art or discourse. It is a dialectical trait, the principle of a struggle between the otherness that transforms all spatial and temporal distance into cultural estrangement and the oneness by which all understanding aims at the extension of self-understanding.” Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 43.

¹²⁶ Gadamer writes that “[t]he very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished...*To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete* [italics in the original].” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301. One is always affected by historical and contemporary circumstances that are not often discernible.

¹²⁷ Gadamer is against the idea that one can objectively stand out of one's environment. He writes that “[t]he very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301.

meant by the situation.¹²⁸ Everyone is limited by factors that determine how one interprets and views the world. These include obvious factors such as race, gender, and creed. The situation is also comprised of less obvious elements such as stories, life decisions, and the experiences that make each person unique. One's own vision is limited by personal history.¹²⁹

Interpretation and Horizon

Interpretation is deeply connected to one's situation and experience. Situation sets the limits of interpretation, while the horizon has the potential for opening up that interpretation. The horizon encompasses the whole scope of one's vision. This vision includes its possible expansion into the future. Though bound by one's situation, the horizon is the element of potential in interpretation. By way of one's horizon, one is not limited to what is at hand. One can move beyond it in order to open new paths of interpretative engagement. Horizon is a position of remaining open to the object of interpretation.¹³⁰ General openness requires one to be attentive to important claims, texts, objects, and actions placed on one's life. Things such as texts, musical performances, and ritual possess powerful ways of garnering attention. They challenge and redefine what was previously known, but on the condition that one remains open to its claims. The

¹²⁸ Gadamer defines situation as a concept that "represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301.

¹²⁹ One is always bound to history. Gadamer writes that "[l]ong before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than [one's] judgments, constitute the historical reality of [one's] being* [italics in the original]." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278.

¹³⁰ Gadamer describes horizon as the "range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons...A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301. Horizon is not a fixed category like situation.

horizon is not a blank slate, rather it represents an anthology of experiences that all persons bring with them in conversation.¹³¹ Texts, performances, rituals and so on are conversation starters. They make claims that the interpreter can adopt, argue, or reject.¹³² In fact, argument is important in interpretation. Arguments and conflicting viewpoints can be important for expanding and moving the conversation forward. Interpretation presents a claim, therefore argument and defense offers a possibility to dig deeper into conversation. When conflicts arise, interpretation uses that as an opportunity to go further.¹³³ Interpreting ritual action may bring conflicts when encountering unfamiliar, and even familiar, ritual. Arguments are a chance for going beyond the superficial

All interpretation begins from an initial situation and possible horizon. The limit and scope of one's horizon is determined by one's openness in interpretation. The horizon can be narrow or even completely absent if one remains closed in the interpretative task. As such, the horizon lies in the interpreter's hands. The goal is not to escape from the horizon, but to embrace one's own situation as necessary for interpretation.¹³⁴

Estrangement is thus beneficial in the interpretative process. Acknowledging

¹³¹ Gadamer defines conversation as a "process of coming to an understanding." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 387.

¹³² Tracy describes these works as classics. He writes "classics [important authoritative works of a given community] arrive with powerful claims to attention, yet their claim is, after all, a claim to our attention and a challenge to our usual expectations...Any contemporary interpreter enters the process of interpretation with some preunderstanding of the questions addressed by a classic text. The good interpreter is willing to put that preunderstanding at risk by allowing the classic to question the interpreter's present expectations and standards." David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 16.

¹³³ Tracy claims that "[a]rguments, at their best, are moments within the wider conversation. Both topical and formal arguments are needed to adjudicate the counterclaims emerging in the wider conversation. Topical arguments analyze all substantive claims, Formal arguments analyze all claims to consistency. Both are helpful whenever conflicts of interpretation emerge. And conflicts do emerge." Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 25.

¹³⁴ Gadamer describes this as one's prejudice. Though today it may have negative connotations, for Gadamer it is the inescapable element of oneself. Prejudice is one's own self-awareness. Thus Gadamer says that [r]eason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms - i.e., it is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 277.

estrangement avoids the illusion of objectivity, thus allowing one to go further in interpretation. A closed interpretation, one that seeks an objective path to knowledge and understanding, is interpretation from the outside. It escapes real engagement with the object, text, or action in interpretation.

Further Problems in Interpretation: Action as a Text

The problems of interpretation are vast, especially for texts. They provide an excellent example of the problems faced in interpretation. For example, texts suffer a semantic distancing between the author and the contemporary reader. As time goes by, understanding the author's mind becomes an arduous and increasingly difficult task. The author is no longer available for questioning once the text is written. There is no longer a direct one to one correspondence between the author's meaning and the interpreted meaning. The text is no longer fixed to the author, thus acquiring semantic autonomy.¹³⁵ The text leaves the author and his or her world behind. One is not deciphering a single fixed meaning. The text expands its public to a potentially unlimited number of interpreters. Meaning is open to an infinite array of readers across various times and spaces.¹³⁶ The interpretive focus is not centered on the author and his or her world. As such, understanding is a process of questioning the things in themselves. All the while, one remains open to being surprised in interpretation.

¹³⁵ Semantic autonomy of the text is a key concern for Ricoeur. For him, when a discourse is inscribed the "author's intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide. This dissociation of the verbal meaning of the text and the mental intention of the author gives to the concept of inscription its decisive significance...Inscription becomes synonymous with the semantic autonomy of the text, which results from the disconnection of the mental intention of the author from the verbal meaning of the text, of what the author meant and what the text means. The text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author." Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 29-30.

¹³⁶ Ricoeur suggests that "a written text is addressed to an unknown reader and potentially to whoever knows how to read...In other words, reading is a social phenomenon, which obeys certain patterns and therefore suffers from specific limitations...A work also creates its public." See Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 31.

Problems of interpretation are not limited to texts. These problems go well beyond the text into other aspects of action and behavior. Textual interpretation is but one example of a larger problem of meaning. Consider the action of speaking. There are considerable problems of interpretation present in speaking. Like a text, speaking creates a semantic distance between what has been said and the speaker. Semantic distance is a continual problem since the experience of the speaker cannot be directly transferred to another.¹³⁷ There is a distance between the discourse, the situation of speaking, and the audience. The experience of the speaker, like the writer, is a private experience. However the meaning is a public event of interpretation.¹³⁸ Interpretation encounters meanings open to a number of different individuals and audiences.

Ritual action brings problems similar to interpreting text or speech. The principles of textual interpretation provide important first steps towards encountering ritual action's meanings. Thinking of action as a text suggests ways one can encounter and interpret ritual action. In Paul Ricoeur's words, "the notion of a text is a good *paradigm* for human action...human action is in many ways a quasi-text."¹³⁹ Like a text, action has a propositional content, is detached from its author or agent, has an importance that goes beyond the initial situation, and can be addressed to an unlimited array of possible

¹³⁷ Ricoeur describes semantic distancing as an immediate event where "[w]hat is said is already at a distance from the very act or even of saying. But a similar primary distance may be noticed between the discourse and its speaker, the inner structure and the outer referent, the discourse and its initial situation, and the discourse and its first audience. The problem of interpretation is already started." Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1995), 37.

¹³⁸ Ricoeur reasons that "experience by one person cannot be transferred whole as such and such experience to someone else...The experience as experience, as lived, remains private, but its meaning, becomes public." Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 15-16. What is left is meaning that is open to a number of variable audience and interpretations.

¹³⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "Explanation and Understanding: On Some Remarkable Connections Among the Theory of the Text, Theory of Action, and Theory of History," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Steward (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 160.

readers.¹⁴⁰ Action's propositional content allows for the detachment of meaning, similar to a text's detachment from its author.

The interpretative task thus goes beyond the text and the speech act. Interpretation is necessary for a variety of actions. Anything situated in the world is estranged and no longer immediately accessible.¹⁴¹ This is more obvious for art and written texts, where what is interpreted is no longer connected to its original world. Nothing is able to reconstruct the work's original world. All finite works and actions cannot overcome the estrangement between them and their original situations and audiences.¹⁴²

Like texts and speech, ritual action is not limited to its original social situation and audience. Instead, it can be interpreted and applied to new social contexts. Visually, ritual action allows for an infinite array of possible "readers." Similar to texts, ritual actions go beyond their initial circumstances through their continual re-enactment of rituals in new circumstances and times. Ritual action is an open text accessible to any reader. Though a ritual's original context can give clues to its meanings, ultimately ritual action creates a special world whereby action "exceeds, overcomes, transcends, the social

¹⁴⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," in *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics & The Human Sciences*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 203-208.

¹⁴¹ Hans-George Gadamer opens interpretation beyond the written text. For Gadamer interpretation is needed for all tradition. He writes that "[i]t is not only the written tradition that is estranged and in need of new and more vital assimilation; everything that is no longer immediately situated in a world – that is, all tradition, whether art or the other spiritual creations of the past: law, religion, philosophy, and so forth – is estranged from its original meaning and depends on the unlocking and mediating spirit that we, like the Greeks, name after Hermes." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 157.

¹⁴² Gadamer is especially critical of hermeneutical methods that attempt to reconstruct the past. The past can not be reconstructed and made contemporary with the object of interpretation. Gadamer writes that "[r]econstructing t original circumstances, like all restoration is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being. What is reconstructed, a life brought back from the lost past, is not the original...a hermeneutics that regarded understanding as reconstructing the original world be no more than handing on a dead meaning." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 159-160. Reconstructing is similar to decoding a ritual in terms of its symbols. Decoding and reconstructing ignore the contemporary meaning of the work or action.

conditions of its production and may be re-enacted in new social contexts.”¹⁴³ The meanings of the ritual action can emerge from their social conditions. As a result, ritual actions present new possibilities and meanings for their readers.

The Elements of Hermeneutics

Interpretation can overcome remoteness between the interpreter and the object of interpretation. The goal of interpretation is to make the remote familiar. Hermeneutics is the process of understanding that takes place between the interpreter and the interpreted.¹⁴⁴ Hermeneutics is typically a theory of interpreting texts.¹⁴⁵ However, hermeneutics also has important implications for exploring the meaning of other experiences and activities. Hermeneutics is a process of conversation with anything that conveys a message.

The hermeneutical process depends on remaining open in interpretation. Openness in interpretation is dependent on remaining engaged with the object of interpretation. This process cannot move forward if one blocks oneself from the other. After all, a conversation is not possible when only one is participating. Dialogue is fundamentally important in interpretation. Hermeneutics is a process of asking questions of and investigating the object in its current form, rather than its historical shadow.¹⁴⁶ As

¹⁴³ Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” 208.

¹⁴⁴ Paul Ricoeur describes interpretation as a way to overcome semantic distance. He suggests that the “purpose of all interpretation is to conquer a remoteness, a distance between the past cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpreter himself [or herself]. By overcoming this distance, by making himself [or herself] contemporary with the text, the exegete can appropriate its meaning to himself [or herself]: foreign, he [or she] makes it familiar, that is, he [or she] make it his own,” See Paul Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 101.

¹⁴⁵ Ricoeur defines hermeneutics as “the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts.” Paul Ricoeur, “The Task of Hermeneutics,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. John B Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 43.

¹⁴⁶ The search for a past truth sacrifices contemporary understanding and application. Gadamer writes that “[t]he text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim to be saying something

an authentic dialogue, the priority is the question rather than the answer. The question expands the interpreter's horizon. It is necessary for the “logical structure of openness that characterizes hermeneutical consciousness.”¹⁴⁷ Hermeneutics uses questioning as a manner of opening the object of interpretation.¹⁴⁸ Opening an object moves it from an estranged condition to one of familiarity. This opening makes it possible for it to be heard in the contemporary situation.¹⁴⁹ Dialogue rescues the hermeneutical horizon from fixation and stagnation.

As a dialogue, the interpreter can work with two different horizons, one's own and the other. Hermeneutics is a process of transposing oneself into the contemporary situation of the other. It works at the contemporary situation of the other, becoming aware of the shared otherness between oneself and the other. This dialogue and transposition thus goes beyond a mere empathy for the other. One incorporates the other into one's own horizon. One is able to see the other within a larger context, thus seeing the other better. It is a balance between shaping interpretation to one's own expectations,¹⁵⁰ while avoiding interpretation that remains blind to the larger context of the other.¹⁵¹

true. We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint...In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find in the past any truth that is valid and intelligible for ourselves.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302-303. Here Gadamer is not saying that the historical is unimportant. Rather when the historical takes precedent the present suffers. It would be a mistake to assume that it is only the historical viewpoint that does this. The historical can be understood to represent any claim to objective thought that seeks an outside viewpoint in interpretation. When interpretation only seeks a supposed objective viewpoint such as author's intent, historical situation, or reason the present is ignored.

¹⁴⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 356.

¹⁴⁸ Gadamer says that “[w]hen a question arises, it breaks open the being of the object.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 356. In interpretation, questioning is an attempt to move past the superficial and into the heart of the other.

¹⁴⁹ Gadamer describes questioning as the manner in which texts are brought into “the living present of conversation.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 362.

¹⁵⁰ Gadamer claims that in interpretation it is “necessary to guard against overhastily assimilating the past to our own expectations of meaning.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 304.

¹⁵¹ Gadamer thinks that one's horizon should learn to “look beyond what is close at hand - not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 304.

Hermeneutics and understanding is a fusion of horizons between the interpreter and the other. Here, in this space, between past and present understandings and contemporary prejudices, a new relationship is formed.¹⁵² One seeks the other in order to understand rather than master. In this relationship, the interpreter and the other complement one another. The goal of such a hermeneutics is not technical control but better understanding of oneself and the other.¹⁵³

Relationship, Conversation, and Classic

Hermeneutics is process of building relationships rather than a semiotic decoding or metaphysical enforcement. The other of interpretation is allowed to speak without being superseded by its own history or symbols. As a relationship, the interpreter and other are continually interpreting one other. This back and forth interpretive movement has no end. The interpreter grows alongside the other through time and experience. Texts, art, music, and ritual are not static entities, sentenced to dwell forever in the obscure vacuum of academic scholarship. They live through conversation and argument. They stand ready to challenge traditional norms and contemporary theories. Their essence is found in conversation, never confined to one point in time and history. When one conversation ends, a new conversation awaits the next scholar or student. The past is

¹⁵² Interpretation is not meant to be done in isolation. The risk of objectification is too great when one attempts to interpret and understand from the outside. Rather interpretation is a coming together of horizons. Gadamer suggests that “[t]here is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself that here are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves...* old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.

¹⁵³ Westphal thus maintains that the “goal is not increased technological control of our environment, natural and social, but increased self-understanding... The work is not so much a completed object or a thing to be mastered by methods of some science but rather an *event*, an unfinished event that is brought toward (but not to) completion in the process of interpretation.” Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2009), 102.

never discarded. Rather, each new conversation builds on the past. In conversation, a new level of understanding emerges. Gadamer writes that the goal is “not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.”¹⁵⁴ The intent of conversation is coming to understand the truth claim addressed by the other.¹⁵⁵

Special forms of conversation acquire the status of a classic. Classics¹⁵⁶ disclose a reality, a certain way of being-in-the-world, which never fail to challenge and provoke the interpreter. Classics thus push the conversation forward.¹⁵⁷ Their effect is haunting. Their claims continue to linger in the interpreter's conscious and subconscious. Classics draw one's gaze and attention to them.¹⁵⁸ They have no need to force the conversation. As a movement built on relationship and dialogue, the conversation with a classic has “a spirit of its own.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 371.

¹⁵⁵ Westphal, *Whose Community?*, 117.

¹⁵⁶ Tracy later goes on to develop the idea of theological “fragments” rather than classics. See David Tracy, “Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1999), 170–184.

¹⁵⁷ Tracy especially stresses the need to understand interpretation as a never evolving conversation. He writes that “text and reader are never static realities but realities-in-process demanding the interaction of genuine conversation to actualize questions and responses (the subject matter). The principal identity which both text or reader possess is the identity-in-difference of ever new and ongoing interpretation. Every classic text, moreover, comes to any reader through the history of its effects (conscious and unconscious, enriching and ambiguous, emancipatory and distorted) upon the present horizon of the reader.” David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (Crossroad: New York, 1981), 105.

¹⁵⁸ Tracy claims that classics are able to draw one's attention to them. Drawing from Gadamer, he says “that certain expressions of the human spirit so disclose a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status. Thus do we name these expressions and these alone, 'classics'...The presence of classics in every culture is undeniable. Their memory haunts us. Their actual effects in our lives endure and await ever new appropriations, constantly new interpretations.” Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 108-109.

¹⁵⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 385.

Classics are not only limited to texts, but can be any expression of the human condition.¹⁶⁰ Ritual action can have the status of classic. Rituals have the ability to move, provoke, and challenge both participants and observers. Every movement has meaning and purpose, nothing is arbitrary. Instead each gesture, from the position of the hands to the movement of the feet has a mysterious way to move and inspire. Ritual action seeks attention, it needs participants. Its life is found expressed through the body. It has a special ability to unite and remind its participants. Its lives through repetition, and each repetition is a reminder. As classics, ritual actions are not easily forgotten.¹⁶¹

Application

Application is the central problem of hermeneutics. Application is essential to the hermeneutical process. As a fusion of horizons, the conversation continually moves forward to application. Conversation is never for the sake of itself, as if it were a self-contained thing. Conversation never stands still as merely interesting; it moves forward toward a goal or application. Classics demand it. Hermeneutics a continual process of understanding, interpretation, and application.¹⁶² The result of hermeneutics is not a

¹⁶⁰ Tracy definition of classic includes several different forms. He declares that “[c]lassics exist. To agree with this, one need not limit the candidates for classical status by elitist criteria of the classicist.” Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 107-108. Classics are the expression of the human condition; as such they belong to the people. They are not obscure texts to be locked away and protected.

¹⁶¹ Classics continually provoke both the mind and heart. They are not easily forgotten or dismissed. Tracy reasons that “[m]ost of us can recall, for example, recalling a novel, poem or essay that had great impact on our lives. Years later we reread it. If it is a candidate for classic status, it will still have that power. Now however, it will bear a new interpretation for our later, either more mature or less authentic lives. Yet the text will still compel and concentrate our attention with the same kind of power of recognition of an essential truth about ourselves and our lives.” Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 116. It is no different for ritual action.

¹⁶² Hermeneutics goes beyond the mere decoding of symbols one might typically find in ritual studies (see chapter 1), instead is a process that seeks the practical implications of interpretation. Gadamer writes, “Understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation. Thus we are forced to go one step beyond romantic hermeneutics [Schleiermacher], as it were, by regarding not only understanding and interpretation, but also application as comprising one unified process...we consider application to be just as integral a part of the hermeneutical process as are understanding and interpretation.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 307.

repetition of what the author has already said. Hermeneutics is not a scholarly parrot. It is a process that moves the conversation towards a concrete application. Consequently, the practical implications of hermeneutics outweigh the theoretical aspects. It is thus a way of re-imagining the interpreted text, object, or action so that it can be given back to the life of the community.¹⁶³ Hermeneutics is a never-ending process of conversation, resulting in a fusion of horizons, which moves towards understanding and interpreting for here and now. Since the present is never stagnant, the hermeneutical process cannot end.¹⁶⁴

Hermeneutical conversation involves more than the interpreter and the other. From beginning to new beginning,¹⁶⁵ the entire process is a communal endeavor. Hermeneutics is not a private activity. It resists being made into private conversation.¹⁶⁶ It is not a conversation for the scholarly elite who “decode” the signs so that the non-scholar can understand. The scholar contributes to the conversation, but does not own it. Conversation is a communal activity. Therefore, any conversation that does incorporate

¹⁶³ Westphal explains that “[t]he texts that concern Gadamer do not merely give rise to theories of various sorts; they found and nourish communities in their life together, partly by describing how things are but especially by prescribing how they can and should be.” Westphal, *Whose Community?*, 109.

¹⁶⁴ All objects of interpretations have practical implications. Gadamer stresses this by arguing that “the text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly...must be understood at every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way. Understanding here is always application.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 307-308.

¹⁶⁵ The conversation never ends. The hermeneutical conversation may repeatedly renew itself as times and situations change, but hermeneutics does not have a definite end point.

¹⁶⁶ Tracy makes this clear when writing, “Any conversation with a classic is always interactive. Once the result of that conversation is communicated to others, it enters yet another dialogue, in principle, with the whole community of competent readers...We belong to history and language; they do not belong to us. If we would belong to them well, we must question them and question ourselves through them. Through that questioning we participate in the conversation of all humankind, living and dead.” Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 29. The conversation with a classic text, work of art, or action belongs to the entire community. One is not entering in one-on-one conversation, instead it is a conversation involving both the past and present. In the case of ritual action, it quite obviously belongs to the community. They are the ones who give it visible form. The interpreter thus does not interpret as if those ritual actors do not exist. Instead, one enters into conversation with them, the wider community, and the past expressions of this ritual.

the larger community should be viewed with suspicion. How can any interpretation have any authentic claim to truth if it does not include the community?¹⁶⁷

Experience

Experience opens the interpreter toward hermeneutical conversation. The interpreter's past is brought into conversation with the unknown experience of the other. The interpreter's experience, or world view, shatters when brought into contact with the other. In a genuine conversation the other informs, challenges, and defies one's expectations. Experiences, both old and new, make change possible. Embracing one's own experience gives a better understanding of the new and oneself. Experience is a gauge for encountering the unexpected. It thus provides a gateway to the other. As such knowing one's own experience gives one a better sense of seeking out that which is new and different.¹⁶⁸

That which is enacted can be strange and unfamiliar to the interpreter. Ritual movements may involve unusual gestures, curious vestments, and corporal invocations. One's past experiences may not line up with the new. However, it does provide the opportunity to explore how these new experiences can change the ways in which one views their own practices. This is because experience directs one towards the new. Past

¹⁶⁷ Dialogue with the wider community is essential for Tracy. He writes that the "larger dialogue with the entire community of capable readers is a major need for any claim to relative adequacy in interpretation. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 121.

¹⁶⁸ Experience has two different senses, new and old, for Gadamer. These are the "experiences that conform to our expectation and confirm it and the new experiences that occur to us. This later – 'experience' in the genuine sense – is always negative. If a new experience of an object occurs to us, this means that hitherto we have not seen correctly and now know it better...we acquire a comprehensive knowledge. We cannot, therefore, have a new experience of any object at random, but it must be of such a nature that we gain better knowledge through it, not only of itself, but of what we thought we knew before – i.e., of a universal." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 347-348. New experience corrects the old. The previous experience is not wrong; rather it is put into dialectic with the new. One can never have the same experience twice, therefore new experience are always dialoguing with the old.

experiences allows one to better absorb new ones. Thus in the hermeneutical conversation, experience builds upon experience. Experience teaches what one can gain from the new. In addition, it adds rather than erases the old. Experience builds a spirit of openness, rather than dogmatism.¹⁶⁹

Hermeneutics draws on the experiences in order to further understand the other. It is a manner of being drawn into the hermeneutical conversation. As a result, this requires an embrace of one's limitations and finitude. Experience shows one what is left to learn and the never ending project of knowledge. The result is a value for the unexpected nature of interpretation, and an appreciation of the real limits in interpretation. Finitude moves one toward the unknown, as opposed to shunning it.¹⁷⁰

Performance

Doing hermeneutics is like a musical performance. When performing, it is not enough to simply reproduce the original as faithfully as possible. There is always an interpretive element in music.¹⁷¹ The greatest musicians go beyond the technical mastery of a musical piece.¹⁷² Rather than merely rehearsing the notes correctly, they bring new

¹⁶⁹ Gadamer writes that "experience always implies an orientation toward new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences but is also open *to* new experiences. The consummation of [one's] experience, the perfection that we call 'being experienced,' does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 350.

¹⁷⁰ Finitude is not an obstacle to overcome. Instead, Gadamer contends that "experience is experience of human finitude. The truly experienced person is one who has taken this to heart, who know that he [or she] is master neither of time nor the future." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 351.

¹⁷¹ Gadamer notes that one cannot "stage a play, read a poem, or perform a piece of music without understanding the original meaning of the text and presenting it in his [or her] reproduction and interpretation. But, similarly, no one will be able to make a performative interpretation without taking account of that other normative element - the stylistic values of one's own day." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 309.

¹⁷² Performance needs to go beyond technical mastery; if this were not so, computers would be the greatest musicians. The fictional character Data, a sentient android from the television show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, laments that though he can play the violin flawlessly, he has no interpretive style of his

life into a piece. Variations in tone, pitch, and time all contribute to a unique performance of the musical piece. The performance changes even though the notes have not.¹⁷³ The musician's prejudices, one's interpretative style, brings unique performances to musical pieces. There is a fusion of horizon between the musician and the musical piece rather than the musician and the composer.

The performance of hermeneutics is an event.¹⁷⁴ This event brings interpreted objects and situations to life. Hermeneutics is not a matter of subordinating the other to a foreign past, author, or symbol. It is not a matter of subordinating the other to the interpreter. Hermeneutics bridges multiple views together. Hermeneutics helps the other speak in new and ever changing scenarios. Without the interpreter, the other remains mute behind a veil of alienation. A symphony remains silent without the work of musicians to perform it. A play is lifeless without the actors who give it life and existence. In this sense, hermeneutics is a way of performing texts, situations, and actions so that their voices can be heard across the temporal distance.¹⁷⁵ Performance is more than just an analogy, hence "[a]ll performance is interpretation *and* all interpretation is performance."¹⁷⁶

own. His work lacks "soul." See "Inheritance," *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, season 7, episode 10, directed by Robert Scheerer, aired November 20, 1993 (Hollywood: Paramount Studios, 2002), DVD.

¹⁷³ Glenn Gould, arguably one of the greatest pianists of the twentieth century, perfectly demonstrates the hermeneutical process. His interpretative genius was not due to his faithful reproduction of the musical pieces, but in the way he was able to continually reinterpret music, most notably the works of J.S. Bach. The difference between the 1955 and 1981 *Goldberg Variations* highlights how different conversations lead to new and exciting applications of the original. See Glenn Gould, "Bonus Track Glenn Gould Discusses His Performances of The *Goldberg Variations* with Tim Page, August 22, 1982," *Glenn Gould: A State Of Wonder: The Complete Goldberg Variations 1955 & 1981* (New York: Sony Classical, 2002), compact disc. Original interview August 22, 1982.

¹⁷⁴ Gadamer writes, "*Understanding proves to be an event.*" Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 308.

¹⁷⁵ Gadamer claims that hermeneutics "has a task of application to perform, because it too serves applicable meaning, in that it explicitly and consciously bridges the temporal distance that separates the interpreter from the text and overcomes the alienation of meaning that the text has undergone." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 310.

¹⁷⁶ Westphal, *Whose Community?*, 102.

Hermeneutics makes it possible for ritual actions to reach new audiences and situations. The performed is re-performed through a cycle of understanding, interpretation, and application. When the ritual ends, the task of hermeneutics begins. Through hermeneutics, ritual action is given the opportunity to be heard. This is not to say that ritual action was mute prior to hermeneutics. In conversation the interpreter seeks the right language with the other. Interpretation is matter of finding the best way of conversing with the other, so that the other is better able to be understood given varying contemporary situations. As such there can be no single universal way of interpreting a ritual action, text, or work of art.¹⁷⁷ Even if a ritual action does not change, the interpreter does not. Performance not only varies from person to person, but even varies across the course of one's life.¹⁷⁸ Thus one is having a different conversation whenever one engages with the object of interpretation. Ultimately interpretation "is not at means through which understanding is achieved; rather it enters into the content of what is understood."¹⁷⁹

The interpreter's job is thus complex and deeply engaging. The interpreter has more in common with the musician or actor than the detached scholar.¹⁸⁰ One does not expect a musician to be completely objective towards the work he or she is performing. If

¹⁷⁷ Any interpretation is part of an evolving process. Since interpreters do not live in a vacuum, neither do the objects of interpretation. Gadamer writes that "interpretation must find the right language if it really wants to make the text speak. There cannot, therefore, be any single interpretation that is correct, 'in itself,' precisely because every interpretation concerned with the text itself...Every interpretation has to adapt itself to the hermeneutical situation to which it belongs." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 398.

¹⁷⁸ Westphal writes "[w]e understand [identify and interpretation] in terms of the person we ourselves are. I am the *same* person I was at fifteen and at fifty, but at the same time I am significantly *different*." Westphal, *Whose Community?*, 103. Life experiences and age are going to continually change the hermeneutical conversation and one's own self-understanding.

¹⁷⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 399.

¹⁸⁰ Gadamer writes that "the concept of interpretation can be applied not only to scholarly interpretation but to artistic *reproduction* - e.g., musical or dramatic performance." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 400. Both the scholar and performer are understanding and interpreting the original musical piece, play, or text in order to bring it to life. Interpretation is a life giving process and thus drastically different from objectivity typically associated with scholarship.

a pianist performed Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata without feeling, it would be considered an “uninspired performance.” Why then does academic scholarship remain obsessed with remaining completely objective? Perhaps it is feared that interpretation is an attempt at ignoring the original. That interpretation after interpretation will finally replace the original. Thus scholars do not seek to perform. Instead they only produce knowledge, but production and performance are not natural enemies.¹⁸¹ Scholars are rarely described as “inspired.” More often than not inspiration is only used to describe the original work.

Language

Expression is a necessary element for all things. They seek to overcome the natural estrangement in finite existence, thus everything seeks communication.¹⁸² Everything, being, has an expressive nature. Expression is a reaching out towards the other. Things need some manner of expressing their existence to those on the outside.¹⁸³ All things express messages intended to give information. They continually convey a message of some kind. The intent and purpose of any work of art, text, or ritual action is

¹⁸¹ Gadamer does not see scholarship and performance as natural enemies. He suggests that “there is no essential difference between the interpretation that a work undergoes in being performed and that which the scholar produces.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 400-401. Performance and production go hand in hand. That is there in involves a degree of creativity and inspiration.

¹⁸² Rahner maintains that the nature of all things is expression. He declares that “all beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily ‘express’ themselves in order to attain their own nature.” Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Volume IV: More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Seabury, 1974), 224.

¹⁸³ Ricoeur describes this as a wonder. He writes that “for an existential investigation communication is an enigma, even a wonder. Why? Because being-together, as the existential condition for the possibility of any dialogical structure of discourse, appears as a way of trespassing or overcoming the fundamental solitude of each human being...what is experienced by one person cannot be transferred whole as such and such experience to someone else. My experience cannot directly become your experience...Here is the miracle. The experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public.” Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 16. Finitude seeks to overcome its own limitations. Art, music, texts, actions, and so on cannot directly speak their experience. The author of the author is obscured by history. This does not mean that the work itself is silent. It has a meaning, several in fact that it seeks to express.

to move away from itself. As such, there is a movement away from things-in-themselves. Things are not satisfied with remaining mute. Their existence is built on creating an audience for themselves.¹⁸⁴ Communication and language are essential for existence. Things of interpretation, such as art and music, actually speak. They validate their existence, and are most alive, in this reaching out. Expression does not hold back, instead it gives itself so that it can communicate itself.¹⁸⁵ It is a manner of projecting into the life of another.¹⁸⁶

All things project themselves towards others with language. Art, music, action, texts, and so on exteriorize their meanings and intentions through language.¹⁸⁷ Things create their own public through their language. If the thing has a message or meaning to share, it will express that meaning through language. The absence of the spoken word

¹⁸⁴ Ricoeur describes this process for texts. He reasons that a work “creates its public. In this way it enlarges the circle of communication and properly initiates new modes of communication. To that extent, the recognition of the work by the audience created by the work is an unpredictable event...it is the semantic autonomy of the text which opens up the range of potential readers and so, to speak, creates the audience of the text. On the other hand, it is the response of the audience which makes the text important and therefore significant.” Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 31. Though Ricoeur is discussing the written text, the implications go well beyond that. As mentioned above, action is a quasi-text for Ricoeur. Therefore Ricoeur's arguments on the written texts has implications for action and other mediums of information. Gadamer frames much of hermeneutical thought around art and performance. For neither philosopher there does not seem to be a clear distinction between written texts and other forms of media.

¹⁸⁵ Things find fulfillment in communicating themselves. Rahner describes this as their symbolic nature. A thing “expresses itself and possess itself by doing so. It gives itself away from itself into the ‘other’, and there finds itself in knowledge and love, because it is by constituting the inward ‘other’ that it comes to (or: from) its self-fulfillment, which is the presupposition or the act of being present to itself in knowledge and love.” Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 230.

¹⁸⁶ Projection is communication. It is a way of expression into the life of another. Rahner suggests that a being “does so by really projecting its visible figure outside itself as its – symbol, its appearance, which allows its to be there, which brings it out to existence in the world.” Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 231.

¹⁸⁷ Ricoeur defines language as the “exteriorization thanks to which an impression is transcended and becomes an ex-expression, or, in other words, the transformation of the psychic into the noetic. Exteriorization and communicability are one and the same thing for they are nothing other than this elevation of a part of our life into the *logos* of discourse.” Rahner, *Interpretation Theory*, 19.

does mean that things have nothing to say. It may make it difficult to determine meaning, but meaning is not absent. Instead meaning is not immediately apparent.¹⁸⁸

Language is not a fixed medium consisting of only words, sentences, and paragraphs.¹⁸⁹ It is a fluid concept incorporating many different forms.¹⁹⁰ Art, music, or action communicate through their own special sort of language. Pictures, actions, events, and music are all capable of transmitting a message or experience through their very own language game.¹⁹¹

The speaker does not need to visualize a word before speaking, saying, or expressing it. Speech and thought are not entirely separate concepts. To speak, one does not first consult the linguistic manual in order to find the right expression. The expression is typically close at hand. One knows what to say by saying it.¹⁹² This principal is true for both the spoken word and ritual action. In the case of ritual action, the body does not

¹⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty describes the expressive qualities of art and music. If a thing has something to say, it will be able to convey a message through language. He writes "every language conveys its own teaching and carries its meaning into the listener's mind. A school of music or painting which is at first not understood, eventually, by its own action creates its own public, if it really says something; that is, it does so by secreting its own meaning." M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1999), 179.

¹⁸⁹ Schleiermacher describes language as "what mediates sensuously and externally between utterer and listener." Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism: And Other Writings*, trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 232.

¹⁹⁰ The course of language is never set. Wittgenstein maintains that "[l]anguage is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from *one* side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 82.

¹⁹¹ Language can incorporate a variety of difference forms. According to Wittgenstein "[t]here are *countless* different kinds of use of what we call 'symbols', 'words', 'sentences'. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten," Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 11.

¹⁹² Merleau-Ponty makes the case that "[t]o know a word or a language is, as we have said, not to be able to bring into play any pre-established nervous network...the near-presence of the words I know: they are behind me, like things behind my back, or like the city's horizon round my house, I reckon with them or rely on them, but without having any 'verbal image'." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 180.

require a retreat into the mind. One is not translating the mental word into a physical gesture, as if the mind and body were separate. The ritual action is already meaningful just by doing it.¹⁹³

The key to language is not found in syntax, instead “[*t*]he essential being of language is *Saying as Showing* [italics in the original].”¹⁹⁴ To say is to show, meaning that saying is a way of letting things appear, be seen, and heard.¹⁹⁵ Saying is in an unveiling. The mystery of meaning no longer remains unspoken. This saying does not belong to human beings alone. All things participate in this saying through a self-showing.¹⁹⁶

Language and Logos

Things reveal, or show themselves, through language. Language is an end in itself. Instead, it brings things into view. Language cooperates with human speech, but is not bound to it.¹⁹⁷ It is the result of this process of saying, or revealing. Saying makes present and reveals the nature of things. It is thus an opening that clears the way towards communication and language. Saying is a drive and passion towards openness. Saying is the movement towards a thing's freedom to announce itself.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹³ Merleau-Ponty describes the sensation of being pricked. When "the word as my hand reaches toward the part of my body which is being pricked; the word has a certain location in my linguistic world, and is part of my equipment. I have only one means of representing it, which is uttering it, just as the artist has only one means of representing the work on which he [or she] is engaged: by doing it. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 181.

¹⁹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 123.

¹⁹⁵ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 122.

¹⁹⁶ Self-showing is described by Heidegger as being "the mark of the presence and absence of everything that is present, of every king and rank." Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 123.

¹⁹⁷ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 125.

¹⁹⁸ As Heidegger put it, "Saying is showing. In everything that speaks to us, in everything that touches us by being spoken and spoken about, in everything that gives itself to us in speaking, or waits for us unspoken, but also in the speaking that we do *ourselves*, there prevails Showing which causes to appear what is present, and to fade from appearance what is absent. Saying is in no way the linguistic expression

Language does not need to be bound to conventional sentence structure. Words connect to the universal experience of the *logos*.¹⁹⁹ All forms of language express themselves through the *logos* by means of “gathering that, as a turning toward, pulls beings together into the gatheredness of their Being.”²⁰⁰ *Logos* is a manner of opening up beings towards one another. The mystery of language is in its ability to open up being.²⁰¹ Ritual action, music, art, and numerous other mediums all participate in the universal modes of expression, experience, and reason. They have an existence that “calls” towards the other. They affect and change the same lived reality in which all beings participate. Non-conventional forms are grounded in a language that seeks to gather being towards itself. Ritual action speaks because of its connection to the *logos*. It seeks to reveal itself to others in order to enter into conversation with its participants and interpreters. As something that unites, expresses, and describe all experience, “language is the sole medium in which to express thought.”²⁰² The *logos* is what makes this possible.

Logos implies that language is more than a system to be applied and used.

Systems limit what may and may not qualify as a language and mode of expression.

added to the phenomena after they have appeared.” Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 126. All things reveal themselves. It is part of this process of revealing and expression.

¹⁹⁹ This refers to the universal *logos* rather than the Logos who is Christ, as described in John chapter one. Tillich describes *logos* as something that the all of reality participates in. It has philosophical roots meaning that “this *logos* is common; every reasonable being participates in it, uses it in asking questions and criticizing the answers received.” Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume I* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 23; Tillich elsewhere defines this *logos* as “the word which grasps and shapes reality.” Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 75.

²⁰⁰ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 180. Heidegger defines the essence of *logos* as gathering.

²⁰¹ Heidegger writes that “[l]anguage is the primal poetry in which a people poetizes Being. In turn, the great poetry by which a people steps into history begins the formation of its language. The Greeks created and experience this poetry through Homer. Language was revealed to their *dasein* [existence] as a breakaway into Being, as the formation that opens beings up.” Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 183. Language is tied to expression and experience. It opens up people and things towards the other, the one outside of oneself. A classic work is not silent, rather their connection to the *logos* means that naturally moves towards gathering others into itself. It works towards opening itself up.

²⁰² David Power, *Sacrament: The Language of God's Giving* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 61.

Language is more than a process of assignment, of making words into signs. Ritual action, along with art and music, is not void of meaning. It is not an empty vacuum waiting for theorists to give it meaning. Its “words” already have meaning. The experiences and meanings of ritual action do not neatly conform to conventional language. Consequently, the job of interpretation is not finding the right words in order to make ritual action meaningful.²⁰³ Ritual action is already meaningful. The interpreter's task is to observe, interpret, and understand. Interpreters assist ritual action by expressing those meanings through conventional words, but they do not give meaning.

These meanings are not subordinate to words. Ritual action and other forms of non-conventional language, already have something to say. These meanings do not need the written or oral word in order to make them meaningful.²⁰⁴ They are already meaningful. They have an effect without one word being uttered or written down. Meanings are tied to a unified process that works together with words.²⁰⁵ Meanings work together with words, taking form in a way that can be understood in particular times and circumstances.

Language is more about the message conveyed than the form that is used.

Language is not limited to set forms such as oral or verbal communication. Therefore it

²⁰³ Meaning belongs to the things themselves. Gadamer explains that the “word is not a sign that one selects, nor is it a sign that one makes or gives to another; it is not an existent thing that one picks up and give an ideality of meaning in order to make another being visible through it. This is mistaken on both counts. Rather, the ideality of the meaning lies in the word itself. It is meaningful already...Experience is not wordless to begin with, subsequently becoming an object of reflection by being named, by being subsumed under the universality of the word. Rather, experience of itself seeks and find words that express it.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 417.

²⁰⁴ Mark Searle writes, “[w]hen ritual is subject to discursive analysis and theological evaluation, it is always more than words can tell.” Mark Searle, “Ritual” in *The Study of Liturgy*, eds. Cheslyn Jones, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 57.

²⁰⁵ Power says that “thinking goes along with the speaking and writing; it is as it were a 'joint venture.’” Power, *Sacrament*, 62.

has more to do with the intent rather than the system employed. Human experience fuels the event of language. Language is thus any living exchange driven by the intent of meaning and communication.²⁰⁶ Mediums like ritual action, being a language, refer to existence itself.

Ritual actions connect with the experiences of their audience. They express these messages through those that are participating with the action itself. Ritual action lives and delivers its message through life itself. No language has existence outside the lived experiences of its author or audience. If the right word cannot be found, through the author's composition or the interpreter's interpretation, it is never birthed into lived existence. Ultimately "language itself brings itself to language."²⁰⁷ Language is an expression of relation that goes beyond conventional definitions of language. Ritual action, art, and music all connect to a universal mode of expression built on word and experience.²⁰⁸

Language of Gesture

Ritual action can be compared to a language of gesture. Gesture is a non-verbal language where meaning is found in the actions performed. It is a body language,

²⁰⁶ Power does not see language as only a verbal phenomenon. Rather language includes "all human media of encounter and exchange, bodily and ritual, as well as verbal...The use of language is governed by intent. Intent is not here understood as a clearly formulated intention. It is rather a human drive, a search for the sense of being and for meaning by which to live. Power, *Sacrament*, 60.

²⁰⁷ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 59. Heidegger is arguing that language is built on experience. Language does not exist as something apart from being. Nor is the author in total control of language. Rather it is a cooperative effort of the author working with language in order to find the word that best fits. Without language the thought remains unspoken. Heidegger uses the example of a poet who puts into language the experience he or she encounters in language.

²⁰⁸ Language is more than a tool to be used. Gadamer views "the misunderstanding in the question of the linguisticity of our understanding is really one about language – i.e., seeing language as a stock of words and phrases, of concepts, viewpoints and opinions. In fact, language is the single word, whose virtuality opens for us the infinity of discourse." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 553.

“[w]hether verbal or nonverbal, it is a way any community creates meaning.”²⁰⁹

Communities and groups use repetitive patterns and behaviors that help to found the community. Repeated gestures establish how members behave towards each other and those outside of the community.²¹⁰ It is an ingrained behavior that reveals the inner dynamic of the community. The defining characteristics of the community are transferred to each individual.²¹¹ Ritual action’s gestures communicate their values to others. The group dynamic becomes the individual dynamic. As a result, ritual action’s gestures “transform the style and values of everyday action, thereby becoming the very ground of action itself.”²¹²

Gesture's meanings are not found apart from action itself. The action is necessary in order to understand their meanings.²¹³ The gesture belongs to its own world, its context. The language of gesture is never a free agent in terms of its meaning. Gesture does not belong to something outside its own world. Neither can gesture be entirely individualistic. Instead, gesture's nature reflects the community that performs it.²¹⁴

²⁰⁹ Elochukwu E. Uzuoku, *Worship as Body Language: Introduction to Christian Worship: An African Orientation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), 5.

²¹⁰ Uzuoku writes that "gestural behavior is repetitive; it establishes a way of doing; it is above all a pattern of communication that ensures group identity. Uzuoku, *Worship as Body Language*, 5.

²¹¹ Uzuoku describes this as "a programmed way of acting that characterizes an ethnic group so that participants express their being part of the group through the ritual gesture." Uzuoku, *Worship as Body Language*, 41.

²¹² Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies: Revised Edition* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 66-67.

²¹³ Gadamer attests that "gesture reveals no inner meaning behind itself. The whole being of the gesture lies in what it says." Hans-Georg Gadamer "Image and Gesture" in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 79. Here the context is the visual arts, but what is argued is equally valid for physical movements and ritual.

²¹⁴ Gadamer writes that all "gesture is human, but not every gesture is exclusively the gesture of a human being. Indeed, no gesture is merely the expression of an individual person. Like language, the gesture always reflects a world of meaning to which it belongs." Gadamer, "Image and Gesture," 79.

Things can be meaningful without ever saying a word.²¹⁵ As a speechless language, the language of gesture does not depend on symbols or one's knowledge of the symbols. Symbols do not speak what would we otherwise be incomprehensible. This language does not depend on experts to make it accessible for a wider audience. The language of gesture is not restricted in making itself known. It is able to show or self-present itself.²¹⁶

The gesture embodies the values that it communicates. The gesture does not refer to a value or emotion, as if it is a sign. Instead it communicates its value by becoming the very value or message itself.²¹⁷ It provokes a intimate relationship between the gesture and observer. Gesture presents itself to the observer, not as an arbitrary illustration, but as an invitation or beckoning. It reaches toward the observer with a desire not only to be read, but to be incorporated into the very being of the observer.²¹⁸ It fuses itself and its qualities into the participant's being.²¹⁹ The gesture thus communicates its meaning

²¹⁵ Speaking of classical art work, Gadamer writes that "[i]f we consider the rich, colorful, and resplendent eloquence that speaks to us so clearly and fluently from the classical periods of painting represented in our museums, and compare it with the creative art of our own time, we certainly have the impression of speechlessness." Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Speechless Image," in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 83. Ritual action does not speak in the verbal sense, though it can use spoken words, but like artwork there is a unique eloquence that one encounters.

²¹⁶ The speechless language is able to reveal itself without the added assistance of others. Gadamer says "that even without all these symbols or any explicit understanding of them, the very subject of representation in all its sensuous richness expresses its own transience." Gadamer, "The Speechless Image," 85.

²¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty uses the example of an angry gesture. The one receiving the gesture does not need to recall previous feelings or search for meanings outside the gesture in order to understand it. He writes "I do not see anger or a threatening attitude as a psychic fact hidden behind the gesture, I read anger in it. The gesture *does not make me think* of anger, it is anger itself." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 184.

²¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty writes "[i]t is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his [or hers]...This object is genuinely present." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 185.

²¹⁹ Rappaport suggests "that in ritual, transmitter, receiver and canonical messages become one – are fused – in the participant." Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 145.

through a real presence. Its language is one of intimacy and connection. Understanding the language of gesture is less about intellect and more about intimacy.²²⁰

The self is defined by ritual action. Gestures form the body into its own image. The body is molded into specific postures in order to bring its message into existence. When words do not suffice, the body becomes a conduit for meaning. Some experiences and messages are so overwhelming that words lack the level depth necessary to convey it. Words do not have the same level of possession or captivation of the physical. Speaking or writing about commitment is not the same as expressing it in a physical way. For example, ritual actions such as baptism and communion continue to exist because these physical displays communicate a unique message. Even in a literate society, these ritual actions continue because something would be missing without physical displays. Part of the message would be missing.²²¹

Physical gestures actualize the abstract. It makes abstract messages such as humility, service, and love into forms that can be seen and felt. The abstract is made immediately available for both the observer and participants. By kneeling, praying, and touching, the body is sculpted in a particular way in order to convey a specific emotion or message. These physical displays mark the body so as to leave a lasting impression on its

²²⁰ According to Merleau-Ponty, "I do not understand the gestures of others by some act of intellectual interpretation; communication between consciousness is not based on the common meaning of their respective experiences, for it is equally the basis of the meaning...I join it in a kind of blind recognition which precedes the intellectual working out and clarification of the meaning." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 185.

²²¹ Rappaport makes this point. He writes that the body "communicates both to the self and to others not only what could be conveyed by an apparently corresponding set of words (e.g., 'I accept Allah'), but also a commitment of the living self to that message. Such physical acts seem to be more than 'mere talk.' It is the visible, present, living substance - bone, blood, gut and muscle - that is being 'put on the line,' that is 'standing up [or kneeling down] to be counted,' that is 'putting its money where its mouth is,' that constitutes the accepting agent." Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 146.

participants.²²² Over time, these physical displays continue to modify one's behavior. One's being is changed by participating in ritual action, not just once, but at every performance of the ritual action. The act of performing is an act of accepting. Through enactment, one accepts the message and in turn, he or she becomes a living metaphor. The ritual action, in both its visible and invisible characteristics, lives in the participant.²²³

As this is occurring, ritual action collectively uses the language of gesture to bring together the religious community. Through this language, it speaks in order to create relationship between individuals. The gesture forms individuals into community, making it possible to act and behave corporately.²²⁴ Ritual action brings individual presences together through the sharing and speaking of the gesture. Ritual action speaks, individuals listen, and community is formed.

Ritual action forms community because behavior creates meaning.²²⁵ It creates this meaning through the world it creates. Its meaning is not one of association or one-to-one correspondence. It is not bound to any fixed meaning. Gestures do not always have to mean the same thing. They are not bound to meaning the same thing at all times. They

²²² According to Rappaport, when a "sign is carved on the body the abstract is not only made substantial but immediate: nothing can be experienced more immediately than the sensations of one's own body...As the abstract is made alive and concrete by the living substance of men and women, so are men and women predicated by the abstractions which they themselves realize." Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 149. The body puts theory into practice. The knowledge ritual action expresses is a knowledge of lived practice.

²²³ Thus, Rappaport writes, "[t]he performer lives both the order and his acceptance of it in the formal posture or gesture. A living metaphor of the union of form and substance is generated as the self-referential and the canonical come together in the ritual act." Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 153.

²²⁴ Uzukwu emphasizes that "the rite is a gesture (body movement), it seeks its meaning within a social body. This fundamental reference of ritual to the community indicates how interdependent humans are: humans express by acting together their belonging to a social body." Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language*, 43.

²²⁵ Behavior is described by Merleau-Ponty as a power force. He writes that "[b]ehaviour creates meanings which are transcendent in relation to the anatomical apparatus, and yet immanent to the behaviour as such, since it communicates itself and is understood." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 189.

continually push and transcend these boundaries. Ritual action pushes outward in order to “transform (renew, create, re-create) society and thus to ensure the well-being of humans through the ritual action itself.”²²⁶ Through a pattern of behavior, the language of gesture opens new ways of understanding ritual action.²²⁷ The gesture has the ability to be both this and that. Clasp one's hands can express the act of prayer, humility, mediation, or all three. Thus gesture allows one to reach out to others in a variety of ways.²²⁸ The explicit goal is connection with the other, by becoming a “living relation with oneself or with one's fellows, language is no longer an instrument, *no* longer a means; it is a manifestation, a revelation of intimate being and of the psychic link which unites us to the world and our fellow men [and women].”²²⁹

Ritual action speaks, and its voice is the gesture. The language of gesture involves the whole body. Ritual action communicates a message that can be read and interpreted by others. It is not so different from other types of communication so as to make it incompatible with hermeneutics. Instead of the written and spoken word, it uses the body. Bodily action is the means through which ritual action speaks. Using the language of gesture, the body takes on the meaning it expresses.²³⁰ Like words on a page, the body acts as a page for ritual action. Unlike a page, the body is never just a passive recipient.

²²⁶ Uzuoku, *Worship as Body Language*, 46.

²²⁷ Merleau-Ponty describes the human body as having "an indefinite series of discontinuous acts, significant cores which transcend and transfigure its natural powers. This act of transcendence is first encountered in the acquisition of a pattern of behaviour, then in the mute communication of gesture." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 193.

²²⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty, [a human] transcends [oneself] towards a new form of behaviour, or towards other people, or towards one's own thought, through one's body and one's speech." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 194.

²²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 196.

²³⁰ The body is a powerful form of expression. Merleau-Ponty says that “the body...must become the thought or intention that it signifies for us. It is the body which points out, and which speaks.” Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 197.

This does not mean that the spoken and written word are unimportant. The physical does not replace other language forms. Instead the physical forms a relationship with the written and spoken word. The body works with the word in order to create a richer and fuller experience. Speech, writing, and the body each bring varying characteristics that interpreters need to consider.²³¹ A hermeneutics of ritual requires varied approaches so as to not focus on one aspect at the expense of others.

The body has an active role in ritual action when forming and presenting the meaning it expresses. Therefore, hermeneutics focuses on the actions of the body. Interpreting and understanding ritual action means changing one's perspective on language. The interpreter enters into conversation with the ritual action itself, which includes gestures and those who perform the gestures. That is where interpretation begins. The body is not the result of meanings formulated outside of it. The body is where meaning begins. To understand ritual action is to engage the body, entailing all physical aspects of ritual action. Hermeneutics can contribute toward understanding ritual action but only if it takes the physical seriously. Interpretation and understanding cannot take place from a distance.²³² The most important aspect of hermeneutics is that one enters into conversation with ritual action by engaging both the action itself and those who perform it. The role of hermeneutics is to show "that existence arrives at expression, at meaning, and at reflection."²³³

²³¹ Rappaport writes, "[t]he relationship between the physical and the spoken in ritual is, rather, complementary, each class claiming virtues the other lacks." Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 152. In extension, the written word also brings unique qualities as well. All three work together in ritual action.

²³² Merleau-Ponty writes that "[w]hether it is a question of another's body or my own, I have no means of knowing the human body other than that of living it, which means taking up on my own account the drama which is being played out in it, and losing myself in it." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 198.

²³³ Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," 106.

The Language of Ritual Action and its Implications

Ritual action communicates by transmitting knowledge and announcing itself to others. Its self-showing is not unintelligible, instead it is “one of many ways in which human beings construe and construct their world.”²³⁴ The saying of ritual action is an act of discovery and knowledge. Ritual action is a dynamic activity of revealing the unknown to its participants and audience. It teaches its participants and transforms the world around it. It does so through the body.²³⁵ Ritual action teaches and communicates a ritual knowledge gained through action. Thus ritual action informs and transforms its participants in the action itself. Ritual action, therefore, lives very much in the moment. What it expresses and communicates is neither merely illustrative nor translatable.²³⁶ One should engage with ritual action at the act of doing it in order to understand it. It teaches “not through detachment but through engagement.”²³⁷

Ritual action creates a world. It gives meaning to the actions performed and the objects used in the ritual.²³⁸ It creates a way of behaving and doing in the world. Ritual

²³⁴ Theodore W. Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," *The Journal of Religion* 62, no. 2 (April 1982): 111-127.

²³⁵ Jennings's argument is that ritual action as an active effect on its participants. It is able to teach and transform those involved. He writes that "[r]itual knowledge is gained by and through the body. We might speak here of the 'incarnate' character of ritual knowledge or say that it is gained through 'embodiment.' This would be somewhat misleading, however. It is not so much that the mind 'embodies' itself in ritual action, but rather that the body 'minds' itself or attends through itself in ritual action." Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," 115. Jennings is avoiding the Cartesian split between the mind and body. It is not that the mind acts and the body follows. Instead, the body and mind work together in order to perform the appropriate gesture in ritual action.

²³⁶ Jennings writes "that ritual knowledge is gained, not in advance of it, nor after it. If ritual knowledge were prior to action, then we would be reduced once again to understanding the ritual as an illustration or demonstration of what is already known in some other way. If ritual knowledge were gained primarily after the action, then an unwarranted priority would be given to the re-cognitive as opposed to the cognitive, to the reflective-critical rather than to the active." Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," 116.

²³⁷ Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," 116.

²³⁸ Jennings posits that "[r]itual knowledge, then, is not so much descriptive as it is prescriptive and ascriptive in character. It prescribes and ascribes action." Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," 116.

teaches through action, using pattern and repetition in order to show how one is supposed to act. It does not argue its point of view through lengthy speeches or written treatises. Ritual action suggests through performing the ritual.²³⁹ It shows one how to act in the world using gestures and objects. Performance enables ritual action to “speak.” It conveys its message by grafting itself into the lives of participants. As such, ritual action is never arbitrary. These gestures and objects are critical. Variation matters, as changes can create different meanings within the same ritual.²⁴⁰

Ritual action does not use gestures and objects to obscure meaning. Ritual action communicates something different from written or oral speech. It is not saying the same thing differently. Ritual action delivers a message that cannot be found in another source.²⁴¹

Physical display is a language of lived expression. It shows meanings instead of reporting them. It is based on the idea that there are some messages, qualities, and experiences that have to be shown in order to be understood. Not everything is "translatable," meaning that one needs to experience or "read" the original to get the full

²³⁹ Jennings describes ritual as "a doing, a praxis, and above all a bodily doing, acting, performing. It is precisely this doing which is 'communicated' or 'transmitted' or taught by ritual action. On one level we can say that the doing of the ritual teaches us to do the ritual." Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," 117. To describe this, Jennings using the example of the Eucharist. He believes that that the Eucharist teaches one how to do it. The Eucharist provokes and encourages imitation. One has to do it in order to understand and know it.

²⁴⁰ As Jennings puts it, "If there were no variation in the ritual performance, we would have to conclude that there is here neither search nor discovery but only transmission and illustration of knowledge gained elsewhere and otherwise. Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," 114.

²⁴¹ Rappaport asks this very same question. He writes "[w]hy is it that humans, who can communicate with ease, efficiency and subtlety through language should also employ such an awkward, limited and expensive mode of communication as physical display? An obvious answer, of course, is that physical display indicates more, more clearly or other than, what words are able to communicate." Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 140.

meaning.²⁴² Being told about a ritual is not the same as witnessing or performing it. The qualities and meanings do not fully translate. However, having a translated text is certainly better than no text. However it can never be the same as the original. One misses the ways ritual action brings qualities into existence. For example, ritual action brings qualities like humility into physical existence. It does so in order to express and teach it to others.²⁴³ Ritual action delivers its message to the whole person with an importance that goes beyond a single moment.²⁴⁴

Ritual action's communication is inviting. It seeks to both reveal itself and invite the other to join in its activity. Participants are needed in order to "complete it, or continue it, or perfect it."²⁴⁵ Therefore ritual action does not convey a secret knowledge. It seeks observers to respond to its call. It is public act that is open to any and all observers.²⁴⁶

The idea of language has important implications for interpreting ritual action. The meaning and intent of ritual action is a projection of meaning. Ritual action seeks to communicate meaning through saying, or showing, itself. It does not seek to withhold

²⁴² Rappaport makes the case that "more ambiguity veils the informative force of a speech that it does such physical acts a bowing or saluting. If a man [or woman] only voices subordination he [or she] may seem to be doing no more than stating reporting or asserting it (since stating, describing, reporting and asserting are almost never done through posture or gesture) by performing an act taken to be in itself subordinating. This is to say that the performative nature of physical acts is likely to be clearer than the equivalent utterance, which could possibly be taken for a mere report of statement." Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 143.

²⁴³ Rappaport explains that [t]hrough kneeling, bowing, saluting, tugging the forelock, uncovering the head or covering it, subordination, piety, devotion (or whatever the gestures represent), are 'realized,' that is, made into *res*, and as such achieve an apparent naturalness equal to that of flowers or wind, if not rock." Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 143.

²⁴⁴ Jennings writes that ritual "teaches one not only how to conduct the ritual itself, but how to conduct oneself outside the ritual space - in the world epitomized by or founded or renewed in and through the ritual itself." Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," 119.

²⁴⁵ Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," 123.

²⁴⁶ "Ritual action not only permits but invites, and even directs, attention to itself. It does this in order to evoke a response to itself on the part of the observer." Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," 125.

itself. Ritual action desires connection. It involves participants who outwardly project the meanings of the ritual action itself. Ritual action's communication is neither unintelligible nor irrational.²⁴⁷ Ritual action's connection to language opens up a pathway towards hermeneutics. Like a speech or text, ritual action projects itself so as to be "read" by others. It makes no difference that much of ritual action is non-verbal. The intent is toward communication.

Ritual Action as Discourse: Entering the Conversation

Ritual action's communication is neither senseless nor unintelligible. Through the language of gesture, ritual action communicates a message that can be interpreted and understood. One can interact and converse with it. It can do this because it is a living language. Its importance is not found in its structure, but rather in its use. Ritual action's connection to the *logos* allows it to reveal itself towards others. Ritual action reveals itself through the language of gesture. Discourse is the moment of this reveal. Discourse is the lived expression and usage of language. When entering into conversation with ritual action, one is engaging in its discourse. Language is never the final product of expression. Expression seeks to overcome language by moving beyond it. Language, the means and the how of expression, lives in the shadow of discourse.²⁴⁸ Language gives birth to the event of discourse.

²⁴⁷ Jennings believes that ritual action is an intelligent action equal to other forms of communication. He writes that "[r]itual action is intelligent action which is different in kind, though not in degree, from such other forms of intelligent action as toolmaking, theoretical formulation, or painting." Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge," 124.

²⁴⁸ Ricoeur describes language as mediation. He claims that language is the "means of which, we express ourselves and express things. To speak is the act by which the speaker overcomes the closure of the universe of signs...to speak is the act by language moves beyond itself as sign toward its reference and toward its opposite. Language seeks to disappear; it seeks to die as an object." Paul Ricoeur, "Structure, Word, Event," in in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 113.

Ritual action is a mode of discourse. Discourse “is *the* event of language.”²⁴⁹ Discourse is the expression of being-in-the-world. It is the lived language of everyday life. It connects with the everyday experience.²⁵⁰ Discourse is the existential factor of language, without which one would be left with a dictionary of words. Discourse drives the usage of language. It is the state of disclosure.²⁵¹

Discourse is the way beings interact in the world. It consists of the everyday conversations that make up daily life. From mundane talk about the weather to late night conversations about the pressing issues of existence, discourse is necessary for bringing individuals into a state of “Being-with-one-another.”²⁵² In discourse something is really communicated “whenever one wishes, asks, or expresses oneself about something. In this 'something said', discourse communicates.”²⁵³ Likewise, ritual action interacts with the world through discourse. The sights, sounds, and physical movements all contribute in the expression and sharing of ritual action's being. Ritual action comes alive through discourse. Ritual action shares its being, its Dasein,²⁵⁴ through situation and experience.

²⁴⁹ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 9.

²⁵⁰ Heidegger claims that “if disclosedness is primarily constituted by Being-in-the-world, then discourse too must have essentially a kind of Being which is specifically *worldly*. The intelligibility of Being-in-the-world – an intelligibility which goes with a state-of-mind – *expresses itself as discourse*. [italics in the original].” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 204.

²⁵¹ While language may be comprised of words, or a system, discourse is the ability to express and disclose. Heidegger writes that “[d]iscourse is existentially language, because that entity whose disclosedness it articulates according to significations, has, as its kind of Being, Being-in-the-world. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 204.

²⁵² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 204. Being-in-the-world moves toward being-with through discourse.

²⁵³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 205.

²⁵⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 32. Heidegger's term for an existence. More specifically an existence concerned with one's own Being and its relationship and understanding of Being. *Dasein* is orientated towards the ontological. *Dasein* is referring to both the singular and corporate nature of ritual action. Ritual action is one activity, yet its existence also includes the participants who enact the ritual action. It is both corporate and singular.

Ritual action brings life to language.²⁵⁵ Ritual action speaks through discourse because of the experiences of its participants.

Ritual action is a form of discourse. Whether in the form of texts, symbols, or gestures, ritual action is not senseless. It is saying something to someone. Religious expression conveys a specific meaning in the form of discourse. Ritual action is an event that actualizes through the actions and activities of people. Discourse is the way religious communities express what is important. Religious experience is tied to language, not in the sense of structure, but in meaning.²⁵⁶ Discourse is not bound to academic scholarship or theological tomes. Instead the most important source of discourse is the religious community itself.²⁵⁷

Ritual action is a discourse, therefore hermeneutics requires one to “identify these originary modes of discourse through which the religious faith of a community comes to language.”²⁵⁸ The mode of communication matters. Ritual action is a unique form of communication. It requires a unique hermeneutical approach sensitive to its form.

²⁵⁵ Ricoeur writes that [l]anguage is not a world of its own. It is not even a world. But because we are in the world, because we are affected by situations, and because we orient ourselves comprehensively in those situations, we have something to say, we have experience to bring to language." Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 21.

²⁵⁶ Ricoeur writes "a religious faith may be identified through its language, or, to speak more accurately, as a kind of discourse...whatever may be the nature of the so-called religious experience, it comes to language, it is articulated in a language, and the most appropriate place to interpret it on its own terms is to inquire into its linguistic expression." Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 35.

²⁵⁷ Academics do not have a monopoly on religious discourse. For Ricoeur religious communication is found in the "expressions embedded in such modes of discourse as narratives, prophecies, legislative texts, proverbs and wisdom sayings, hymns, prayers, and liturgical formulas" Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 37. Here Ricoeur does not mention ritual action or other non-textual forms of communication. It is not a stretch though to suggest that Ricoeur would not have a problem with including modes such as ritual action to this list.

²⁵⁸ Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 37.

All “religious experience comes to language through specific modes of discourse,”²⁵⁹ therefore all interpretation must work with the given form.²⁶⁰

The discourse of ritual action is more than a systematic structure. Discourse conveys a message that only exists in the performance of language. Therefore, discourse “has an *act*, as its mode of presence... To speak is a present event.”²⁶¹ The event of discourse has a temporary existence, the giving and receiving of its message occurs when language is enacted.²⁶² This means that discourse only occurs in the present moment. The event of discourse vanishes immediately after it occurs. However, a trace is left behind. Discourse leaves its propositional content in the background. The performed content comes and goes; the experience of it is limited to the present moment. That which is said, however, lingers on.²⁶³ In the strictest sense, the event is indescribable. This does not mean that one is left with silence after the fact. Significant events, in the act of actualization, make themselves visible to their audience or reader.²⁶⁴ The event of discourse, while fleeting, makes itself known through its meaning. Meaning is the goal of

²⁵⁹ Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 39.

²⁶⁰ For Ricoeur, this means that “its meanings are ruled and guided by the modes of articulation specific to each mode of discourse.” Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 39.

²⁶¹ Ricoeur, “Structure, Word, Event,” 114

²⁶² The system only has an existence in itself. It does not actualize or bring to life any part of language. Discourse, the performance of language, brings to life language. Ricoeur explains that the language “system in fact does not exist. It only has a virtual existence. Only the message gives actuality to language, and discourse grounds the very existence of language since only the discrete and each time unique acts of discourse actualize the code.” Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 9.

²⁶³ Ricoeur clarifies the distinction between system and discourse. He describes how “system in fact does not exist. It only has a virtual existence.” Next, Ricoeur makes the case that “discourse is not merely transitory and vanishing...It may be identified and re-identified as the same so that we may say it again or in other words. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 9.

²⁶⁴ Ricoeur explains that events makes themselves visible to others. He writes “[e]very apology for speech as an event, therefore is significant if, and only if, it makes visible the relation of actualization, thanks to which our linguistic competence actualizes itself in performance.” Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 11.

discourse, so that “if all discourse is actualized as an event, it is understood as meaning.”²⁶⁵

Discourse can take place with a great degree of freedom. Discourse is comprised of a variety of different choices whereby differing actions are included or excluded. These choices are unleashed in unique combinations that create new actions.²⁶⁶ Discourse is the creative force in communication that makes possible the creation of an infinite number of actions. Discourse is not bound to one meaning or way of engaging audiences. It has the freedom to change its approach, including the position of the hands, the order within the ritual, who performs it, and so on. It has a polysemic nature, meaning that ritual action can have more than one meaning. Ritual action, like all discourse, can vary its approach based on context.²⁶⁷ Ritual action remains a communal activity. Its discursive function overcomes its own structure in order to adapt to new times and circumstances. True discourse is not ignorant of its world and audience.

Discourse has a reference, “[t]o speak is to say something about something.”²⁶⁸ Discourse moves beyond itself, as language, towards its intended meaning. One moves away from systems in discourse, by going toward the lived expressions of language. Through reference, the language or system goes towards its intended goal of speaking to

²⁶⁵ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 12.

²⁶⁶ Here Ricoeur is specifically talking about the act of speaking and writing. Though there is nothing here that cannot be applied to ritual action. The premise of action as a text allows one to make this connection. Ricoeur describes discourse as a "series of choices by which certain meanings are selected and others excluded. Ricoeur, "Structure, Word, Event," 114.

²⁶⁷ Ricoeur notes that words have more than one meaning. He writes that "our words are polysemic; they have more than one meaning. But it is the contextual function of discourse to screen, so to speak, the polysemy of our words and to reduce the plurality of possible interpretations." Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 17.

²⁶⁸ Ricoeur, "Structure, Word, Event," 114.

someone.²⁶⁹ Reference is only available when language is used. It is the moment when language is brought to life, using language to speak to specific times and circumstances. This movement from theory to practice is known as the speech event.²⁷⁰

Ritual action as a discourse transcends itself as a system.²⁷¹ The language of gesture cannot move beyond itself as it is. It needs to refer to something or to someone in order to reach its intended purpose. Ritual action comes alive in its use.

Yes, and...

Ritual action pushes beyond itself in order to create a new world.²⁷² It redefines the world around it in order to propose a new way of being-in-the-world. Ritual action redefines the present, looking for new ways of being or experience in both participants and observers.²⁷³ Ritual action reshapes the everyday into its own image. It reshapes the present into an undefined image, open to interpretation, but substantially different than what was before. Ritual action communicates, making itself known, so that it might make a new future in the present. This present future embodies the qualities it teaches and transmits. This is not the distant future, but a future of the here and now.²⁷⁴ This future

²⁶⁹ Ricoeur suggests that the "reference expresses the movement in which language transcends itself." Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 20.

²⁷⁰ Ricoeur explains that reference "is what the sentence does in a certain situation and according to a certain use. It is also what the speaker does when he [or she] applies his words to reality. That someone refers to something at a certain time is an event, a speech event." Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 20.

²⁷¹ Ricoeur explains that "[w]ords refer to other words in the round without end of the dictionary. Only discourse, we say, intends things, is applied to reality, expresses the world. Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 43. As a discourse, ritual action only speaks in the moment of reference. It needs to say something to someone.

²⁷² This world is explained by Ricoeur as "a world that I might inhabit and wherein I might project my ownmost possibilities. This is what I call the world of the text, the world probably belonging to this unique text." Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 43. In place of "world of the text," one could substitute the world of ritual action. Ritual action, like a text, projects its own possibilities and world. To engage it, one has to enter into its world.

²⁷³ Ricoeur rhetorical asks if "the force of this projected world a force of rupture and of opening?" Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 45.

²⁷⁴ Theological speaking, Ricoeur compares this new world to a "new covenant, the kingdom of God, a new birth." Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 44.

continually reshapes the present one individual at a time. The event of discourse is present in every person, creating an individual and collective phenomenon. It is and is not an individual event. The discourse event happens simultaneously in both the individual and the community. The goal is to reshape communities. Discourse creates a new world, yet this can only begin at the individual level. Ritual action's beauty is found in simplicity. It needs neither eloquent speech nor moving prose, all ritual action needs is the body. It moves one at the most basic and primal level. One is moved towards a level of gesture, touch, and love.

Hermeneutics is a helpful starting point for engaging ritual action. It provides a gateway for entering into the world of ritual action, a world where the fusion of horizons occurs between the interpreter and ritual action. Hermeneutics adapts to a language of the body before entering this world. It moves beyond a language of speaking and writing. Hermeneutics requires special attention to the unique nature of ritual action. It gives attention to the body, thus recognizing it as neither incidental nor illustrative. The body becomes necessary for meaning. The value of hermeneutics is not in structuralism, semiotics, or metaphysics. Hermeneutics is important because it gives attention to ritual action. The world of ritual action is the domain of hermeneutics.²⁷⁵ One needs to enter, live, and experience this world. Hermeneutics brings one into this rupture, the breach created by the world of ritual action. It positions one towards understanding. This does not mean that there are no longer barriers in interpretation. Like other forms of language, ritual action is not immune to the distancing effect between author and observer. Entrance

²⁷⁵ Ricoeur writes that "general hermeneutics invites us to say that the necessary stage between structural explanation and self-understanding is the unfolding of the world of the text." Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," 44.

into this world requires a hermeneutics that takes seriously the physicality of ritual action. The interpreter bridges together hermeneutics and the language of gesture. The concept of language should be expanded so as to fully understand how ritual action uses the body in communication. Ritual action's connection to language and the body opens new ways of interpreting how ritual action conveys its meaning to the outside world.

Hermeneutics represents a beginning rather than an end. It opens the door towards meaning, but going further requires the openness of deconstruction. One needs to go further into the various and often contradictory aspects of meaning. Deconstruction offers a new approach towards ritual action that includes radical openness in interpretation and meaning.

Chapter Three: Learning to Listen: Deconstruction and Ritual Action

For millions of years mankind [sic] lived just like the animals.

Then something happened which unleashed the power of our imagination.

We learned to talk, we learned to listen.²⁷⁶

Opening the Conversation

Learning to listen is easier said than done. Merely speaking is neither remarkable nor surprising for most people, though it is not unusual to compliment someone as a good speaker. Those who speak or write well are generally applauded and admired. Talking comes naturally to human beings. People are expected to express their feelings, desires, beliefs, concerns, and so on. Speaking is a way to announce one's existence. Not doing so runs counter to social norms. Talking is not a bad thing. When newscasters say "talks broke down today," it signals discord and disagreement among parties. Progress requires speaking and communication with one another.

The other side of talking is listening. The act of communication is incomplete without it. Talking means very little if no one receives what is communicated. Without someone to listen, there is no communication. Even talking to oneself requires listening. Words are lost, thoughts remain mute, and expression is silent when listening is absent. Good listening is essential for conversation, understanding, and interpretation. This is why being described as a "good listener" is such a compliment. The act of listening requires a different set of skills sometimes harder to acquire. One learns to speak by first

²⁷⁶ Stephen Hawking, "British Telecom Advertisement," YouTube video, 1:40, from a British Telecom advertisement filmed 1993, posted by "adrianhosford7," August 4, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmYHBL2wFcA>.

listening with the expectation that one will be able to express oneself. Being a good listener is something that comes later, if at all.

Learning to Listen

Ritual action revolves around having something to say. In return, theologians, philosophers, social theorists, and so on have plenty to say about it. There are no lack of words when it comes to speaking of ritual actions. Everyone seems to have something to say.

The major problem is a lack of listening. Often there is so much to say that one neglects the act of listening. When there is so much to say, listening often feels like an afterthought. Listening is the most important act when engaging with ritual action. Before writing or speaking, there needs to be listening. This requires a shift in perspective beginning with the current situation, practice, or ritual action at hand. This approach takes seriously the voice of what is being studied. Hermeneutics prepares one to listen. The actual act of listening requires both attentiveness to the situation and a spirit of openness.

Hermeneutics alone is not enough for listening to ritual action. In order to listen to ritual action, how one listens ought to change. Achieving this level of listening requires a movement and reorientation in perception. This requires an engagement with absolutes and grounds of understanding, meaning that that one needs to “let go” or deconstruct what one already knows. This is not a stripping away of one's prejudices, but rather a removal of imposed expectations. Listening requires one to let go of what one expects to hear or find. Deconstruction offers an approach that brings radical openness towards interpreting ritual action. Deconstruction leaves meaning open and avoids absolutes.

Difficult and risky, such a movement towards the unexpected requires further explanation.

Why Deconstruction?

Deconstruction is not easy to define, even perhaps undefinable. It cannot be labeled as a method or system.²⁷⁷ It has no rules, no doctrines, and no how-to manual.²⁷⁸ No one is a master or an expert of deconstruction. It is not a tool to be used, as if deconstruction were a thing to be controlled.²⁷⁹ Deconstruction is something already happening within things themselves.²⁸⁰ It comes from the natural desire for things, texts, situations, and so on to be as clear as possible. Deconstruction is less about doing and more about listening without interruption to the other.

One can point to certain traits that characterize deconstruction. As the name implies, deconstruction challenges the structuralist belief in principle or signifying essences.²⁸¹ Namely that a prescribed structure is always present in the text, situation, or ritual action. A structuralist approach is the search for an assumed meaning that corresponds with “some deep-laid mental 'set' or pattern of response which determines

²⁷⁷ “To present ‘deconstruction’ as if it were a method, a system or a settled body of ideas would be to falsify its nature and lay oneself open to charges of reductive misunderstanding.” Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 2004), 1.

²⁷⁸ James K.A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 9.

²⁷⁹ Smith writes that “[d]econstruction is not the effect of a master interpreter who comes and does something to a text, nor the result of bringing external tools or appliances to work ‘on’ a text.” Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, 9.

²⁸⁰ Smith suggests that “deconstruction happens *within* texts, from inside, out of their own resources.” Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, 9. In addition to texts, one can also add ritual actions, situations, traditions, and so on.

²⁸¹ Andrew Shepherd defines deconstruction as a theory that “declines the structuralist assumption that structuralist principles are essences. Eschewing any form of essentialism, ‘deconstruction’ seeks to reveal the way in which philosophical language, rather than signifying essences or givens, is itself historical, contingent and temporary.” Andrew Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas, Derrida, and a Theology of Hospitality* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014), 49.

the limits of intelligibility.”²⁸² Instead of searching for systems of relationships that correspond to the mind or any other *a priori* truths, deconstruction argues against static or foundationalist definitions. It challenges theories that fail to take in account the dynamic nature of language and culture. Definitions are neither eternal nor correspond with anything outside of themselves. Dualism, the division of being and language, is challenged. This challenge includes hierarchical thought.²⁸³

Deconstruction can raise concerns among some. It can be represented as a direct challenge to the truth claims of scripture and Christianity. Mark Taylor says that “deconstruction is the 'hermeneutic' of the death of God.”²⁸⁴ Though God is not the direct topic here, this quote demonstrates the attitude many have towards deconstruction, namely that it promotes the death of absolutes and truth.²⁸⁵ Opponents argue that deconstruction cannot speak constructively on ritual action. However, deconstruction's threat to religion, faith, and knowledge is severely overstated, based more on fear than reality.²⁸⁶ Deconstruction seeks knowledge and the truth of things like other manners of inquiry. In deconstruction, one holds a deep desire for truth and understanding. One is

²⁸² Norris, *Deconstruction*, 3.

²⁸³ Shepherd suggests that “philosophical discourse and language are disassembled by a rereading of the text, in which attention is paid to the way in which philosophical constructions depend on seemingly-fixed meanings and definitions, and clear-cut binary relationships which are often hierarchically-ordered.” *The Gift of the Other*, 48.

²⁸⁴ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6.

²⁸⁵ “Postmodernism has been thought by some to be profoundly anti-religious... [p]ostmodernism popularly invokes fears of relativism, nihilism, and linguistic idealism (there is nothing that is not the construct of language).” Graham Ward, “Postmodern Theology,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, eds. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 335. In this sense, there are a variety of postmodern approaches, deconstructionism being one of many.

²⁸⁶ John Caputo addresses this fear. He writes, “Deconstruction is not out to undo God or deny faith, or to mock science or make nonsense out of literature, or to break the law, or generally, to ruin any of those hoary things at whose very mention all your muscles constrict. Deconstruction is not in the business of defaming good names but of saving them.” John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 5.

willing to sacrifice that which one considers illusory and peripheral in order to find it. One sees an inner truth and meaning in all things.²⁸⁷ This truth desires to be heard. It requires one to filter out the “noise” surrounding it in order to hear it.²⁸⁸ Deconstruction makes no claims to be opposed to truth. Concerned with the truth, it is in fact a “theory of truth, in which truth spells *trouble*.”²⁸⁹

As a theory of truth, deconstruction continues the hermeneutical process.²⁹⁰ In its quest for truth, deconstruction accepts no substitutes or illusions.²⁹¹ Deconstruction’s eagerness to do away with the superfluous may be quite shocking to some, especially when superfluous meanings and interpretations have long standing traditions. Deconstruction pushes hermeneutics forward and farther than it could ever go by itself. By challenging traditions and “deconstructing” previous meanings, it has all the appearance of a “boogeyman.”²⁹² Yet its eagerness originates from a *desire* for truth. This desire requires deconstruction to listen intently. It suggests to break some things down

²⁸⁷ Though Paul Tillich stands removed from deconstruction, he does share in its concerns. As he observes, “The surface must be penetrated, the appearance undercut, the ‘depth’ must be reached, namely the *ousia*, the ‘essence’ of things, that which gives them the power of being. This is their truth, the ‘really real’ in difference from the seemingly real. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 101.

²⁸⁸ Caputo explains that all things “tremble by their own inner impulse, by a force that will give them no rest, that keeps forcing itself to the surface, forcing itself out, making the thing restless. Deconstruction is organized around the idea that things contain a kind of uncontainable truth, that they contain what they cannot contain.” John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 29. Deconstruction does nothing that things do not already do to themselves. Truth is never comfortable in the background. It will come to the surface, even if it must deconstruct its own self.

²⁸⁹ Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 30.

²⁹⁰ As Caputo writes, “deconstruction is at the same time a hermeneutics of truth.” Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 30.

²⁹¹ Tillich claims that “the problem of the ‘truly real’ cannot be avoided. The seemingly real is not unreal, but it is deceptive if it is taken to be really real.” Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*, 101. Long before deconstruction arrived, Tillich was already questioning many of the assumptions theology had regarding what is true.

²⁹² Deconstructionism is like the monster lurking under the beds of theological doctrines and traditions. To deal with this one either tells oneself that the monster is not real or live in constant fear of what this monster might do. Solidifying and hardening theological positions is a way of coping for some.

and move aside what no longer works. In order for the conversation to continue, one should go deeper into the very heart of the matter.²⁹³

Deconstruction is a postmodern way of knowing that is best characterized as style, rather than a method. It does not draw from a strict doctrine of precepts nor employ complex systematic thinking.²⁹⁴ Instead, its biggest strengths come from flexibility and adaptability.²⁹⁵ It represents the best approach for communicating, interpreting, and exchanging ideas and meanings in a postmodern age.²⁹⁶ Under the influence of postmodernism, deconstruction works through exception and creativity.²⁹⁷ It is a “constant reminder of the ways in which language deflects or complicates the philosopher's project.”²⁹⁸ As such this complication does not represent a barrier to interpretation, as much as enriches it.

Embracing the Instability of Meaning

Deconstruction, and postmodern thought as a whole, is guided by the idea that meaning continually changes and adapts. Language and meaning are fluid concepts, continually under the influence of differing relationships. Language is a continual series

²⁹³ Caputo explains that the “point of deconstruction is to loosen and unlock structures, to let the shock of alterity set them in motion, to allow them to function more freely and inventively, to produce new forms, and above all to say yes, *oui, oui*, to something whose coming eye hat not seen nor ear heard. Deconstruction gives old texts new readings, old traditions new twists.” Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 18.

²⁹⁴ Norris maintains that it is “a deliberate attempt to turn the resources of interpretative style against any too rigid protocols of method or language.” Norris, *Deconstruction*, 17.

²⁹⁵ Caputo describes this as a “*style*, rather than as a body of doctrines; it is an inflection or alteration that continues the ‘project’ of modernity, but by other means. Where modernity thinks there are pure rules and a rigorous method – in ethics as well as in science – postmodernity advises flexibility and adaptability.” John D. Caputo, *Truth: Philosophy in Transit* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 5-6.

²⁹⁶ Lyotard declares “that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postmodern age. This transition has been under way since at least the end of the 1950s.” Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3. This is Lyotard’s working hypothesis. Knowledge and information have fundamentally changed, thus requiring new attitudes and relationship towards knowledge. It is the end of the era of metanarratives.

²⁹⁷ Caputo, *Truth*, 6.

²⁹⁸ Norris, *Deconstruction*, 19.

of moves and countermoves. In this manner, language is strategic. It is based on both the experience of the sender and the receiver. Communication is a provoking endeavor, designed to move the receiver to react. The sender also reacts, anticipating any number of moves and countermoves.²⁹⁹

A game of tennis illustrates this process. The two players represent the sender and receiver of information. Each player prepares moves and countermoves in order to send the ball back to one another. As one hits the ball, moves are being made in preparation for the tennis ball's return. The ball, or meaning, is never in a fixed location. Like conversation, the tennis ball continually moves back and forth, never staying in any one location for too long. Of course, no analogy is perfect. The players in this game are not out to win, and meaning eternally moves back and forth between them. Imagine more than one ball, even a seemingly infinite amount of balls moving to and fro across the court. This is the situation, instead of one meaning, there are a multitude of meanings. The picture here is of a game that encourages an extreme degree of flexibility. Expectations do exist, but never to the detriment of creativity within the game itself.³⁰⁰ Communication is responsive rather than remaining as a fixed idea outside of experience.

²⁹⁹ Lyotard's theory is called the "agonistic aspect of society." He says, "Each language partner, when a 'move' pertaining to him is made, undergoes a 'displacement,' an alteration of some kind that not only affects him in his capacity as addressee and referent, but also as sender. These 'moves' necessarily provoke 'countermoves' - and everyone knows that a countermoves that is merely reactionary is not a 'good' move." Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 16.

³⁰⁰ Lyotard uses the example of two friends in conversation. "The interlocutors use any available ammunition, changing games from one utterance to the next: questions, requests, assertions, and narratives are launched pell-mell into battle. The war is not without rules, but the rules allow and encourage the greatest possible flexibility of utterance." Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 17. Who is to say that one should only play tennis?

The instability of language can be a source of discomfort. It signals a lack of control, forcing some to do all they can to control language.³⁰¹ But control amounts to little more than an illusion. Control is based more on fantasy than reality. One can never control words, nor can the meaning of words be predicted. The author is betrayed by his or her own words.³⁰² Meaning continues to evolve and change as time and circumstances change.

Language and meaning never sit outside the world. They are always found situated in a place and time. Language may even create a world of meaning, but though it is its creator, it is not its master. Creation does not equal control.³⁰³ Instead language continues to grasp for meaning. As its creator, it seeks to bring meaning under its domain. Yet meaning is not a cooperative creation. It refuses to remain under the tight control of the other. In fact, the creator/created relationship between language and meaning may be built on an illusion. Language asserts control because it is certain that it is the first cause of meaning. What language fails to realize is that meaning goes much deeper. Meaning is

³⁰¹ Cupitt writes, “Undisciplined, wayward speech is frightening. We mustn’t allow our tongues to run away with us: hence the traditionally popular sermon topic of ‘the government of the tongue’. What is needed to keep language and the world in order is the rule of one original founding and commanding will that has complete control of language and therefore of all the world. Whereas inconsequential talkativeness equals lack of control, and untidy world.” Don Cupitt, *The Fountain: A Secular Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 21. This complete control is of course impossible. Civilization ancient and modern have attempted to control language and thought. The endeavor ultimately results in failure. People should be free, in language and in thought.

³⁰² Cupitt notes that “[w]ords run, and meaning proliferates. I cannot hope fully to control the meaning of what I have said. There is no way of guarding it against any possibility of future misinterpretation...Cultural conditions have changed, language itself has changed, and I have changed - and I do not know how it is that some people’s texts have the capacity to renewing themselves by taking on interesting new meanings as the years go by, whereas other people’s texts become state and boring.” Cupitt, *The Fountain*, 21.

³⁰³ Nancy puts it this way, “Language says the world; that is, it loses itself in it and exposes how ‘in itself’ it is a question of losing oneself in order to be of it, with it, to be its meaning - which is all meaning.” Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3. In order for language to be, it should first lose itself. Its meaning is not tied to any value within itself, rather its meaning is found in its own loss.

connected to a mystery that goes beyond time and space, past and future. It abides in language but is not tied to it. Instead, meaning abides in all things without ever feeling the need to be restricted.³⁰⁴

Flexibility and circulation represent the spirit of deconstruction. Its mode of belief is one of continual movement and expression. Its only affirmation or creed is that meaning should never be fixed. Meaning circulates around and around, never remaining bound to any one form. It repeats itself in moment after moment. It is a never ending sequence of present moments. Therefore it repeatedly affirms the here and now.³⁰⁵

Circulation of meaning avoids linear thinking. Sometimes B does not necessarily follow A. It may need to move past Z first.³⁰⁶

Deconstruction releases meaning from the prison of reason. It recognizes that meaning and truth best function when they are free. Deconstruction struggles against the institutional prisons that seek to control what is considered meaningful. Institutional prisons do so under that domain of reason, as if reason were a weapon to be employed.³⁰⁷ Reason is trapped by the power of institutions, and as such meaning and truth are

³⁰⁴ Nancy describes meaning as circulation. He writes that “this circulation goes in all directions at once, in all the directions of all the space-times [*les espace-temps*] opened by presence to presence: all things, all beings, all entities, everything past and future, alive, dead, inanimate, stones, plants, nails, gods – and ‘humans.’” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 3.

³⁰⁵ Nancy writes, “Circulation goes in all directions: this is the Nietzschean thought of the ‘eternal return,’ the affirmation of meaning as the repetition of the instant, nothing but this repetition, and as a result, nothing (since it is a matter of the repetition of what essentially does not return).” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 4.

³⁰⁶ There are no rules as to where meaning must go. For example, Nancy says, “Circulation – or eternity – goes in all directions, but it moves only insofar as it goes from one point to another; spacing is its absolute condition. From place to place, and from moment to moment, without any progression or linear path, bit by bit and case by case, essentially accidental, it is singular and plural in its very principle. It does not have a final fulfillment any more than it has a point of origin.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 4-5.

³⁰⁷ Caputo affirms that reason “has been institutionalized. It is not allowed to roam the streets freely...today reason is housed within the framework of an institution, like the university, that it functions within an administrative setting.” John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 228.

carefully controlled. Reason is embedded in power, forced to regulate meaning and truth.³⁰⁸ Deconstruction is the fight against this institutionalization and power. It is a fight against the need to constantly prove the usefulness of an institution.³⁰⁹ Knowledge is considered “legitimate” when it serves the goals of the community in power.³¹⁰ So much so that “[k]nowledge is no longer the subject, but in service of the subject.”³¹¹ The ultimate criterion for knowledge is thus “what is it worth?”³¹² What is meaningful is clearly defined ahead of time. One already knows ahead of time what he or she expects to find.

Deconstruction renews individual freedom and the joy of genuine discovery. This means letting go of a certain of the academic intellectual, placing this role in the wider sphere of culture and community. Relinquishing of power allows intellectuals to serve the community instead of the other way around.³¹³ Deconstruction trades power for play so as to give the greatest possibility for freedom for thought. In deconstruction, one recognizes

³⁰⁸ Caputo describes reason as “always embedded in systems of power. To a great extent what ‘reason’ means is a function of the system of power which is currently in place, and what is irrational is what is out of power. Indeed it is of the essence of the power which institutionalized reason exerts that it is able to define what is out of power as ‘irrational.’ *Radical Hermeneutics*, 229.

³⁰⁹ Caputo despairs against the current state of the university. He writes that the university is “expected to train future citizens, to make good Americans (or Frenchmen, or whatever one needs). The university is put more and more to work by the society to which it belongs, and it has less and less time for the free play of ideas whose ground, reason, and practical purpose cannot be easily or directly shown.” *Radical Hermeneutics*, 231.

³¹⁰ Lyotard writes that “knowledge has no final legitimacy outside of serving the goals envisioned by the practical subject, the autonomous collectivity.” Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 36.

³¹¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 36.

³¹² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 54. Missing here is the exploration and discovery of knowledge. Freedom is sacrificed in the name of “usefulness.”

³¹³ Vattimo envisions a new role for intellectuals. This means that “philosophers no longer sovereign, no longer counselors of princes, certainly means imaging a new, as yet undefined, role for the intellectual: not a scientist, not a technician, something more like a priest or an artist – but a priest without a hierarchy, and an artist of the streets.” Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 21.

that the best chance of discovery, of listening, is found within the game of play.³¹⁴ This game uses questioning, exceptions, and creativity as its tools.³¹⁵ The goal is not to arrive at conclusions but to find further questions.

Moving Beyond the Center

Questioning and free play means letting go of all assumptions. In open interpretation, one resists the urge to guess the other's origin. It is akin to "putting words" in the mouth of the other. The urge to speak for the other and guess at its source is difficult to subdue. One can easily assume that after enough layers are peeled the center will be revealed. But what if meaning is like an onion, and in the layers rather than the center? Does knowing that this onion lacked a center make the work any less rewarding? Does a "center" define an object or activity such as ritual action? Deconstruction moves toward thinking without foundations or centers, so that the work of listening and interpretation can take place.³¹⁶ It lets go of a supposed need for a metaphysical foundation.³¹⁷

³¹⁴ Caputo asserts that deconstruction "speaks in the name of freedom - of speech and writing and action - and of keeping the game fair. It warns against a rationality which declares its other irrational and seeks exclusion, like the leper, or its confinement, like the mad." Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 234.

³¹⁵ Caputo writes that while "modernity favours the universal, postmodernists savour the singular and idiosyncratic. Modernist do not welcome exceptions to their rules; postmodernists think that the exception is the engine of creativity and the occasion on which the system can reinvent itself. Where modernists seek certitude, postmodernists see the salutary effects of a healthy scepticism" Caputo, *Truth*, 6.

³¹⁶ Vattimo suggests that "the end of metaphysics is not merely the discovery, by a philosopher or by a school of thought, that Being is not the objectivity to which science has reduced it. It is above all associated with a series of events that have transformed our existence, of which postmetaphysical philosophy gives an interpretation rather an objective description." Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 15.

³¹⁷ Vattimo makes the case that "[a] way must be found past, or beyond, metaphysics, or at any rate metaphysics must be rejected, not because it fails to include the subject of the theory and is thus incomplete but because it legitimates, with its objectivism, a social and historical order from which the liberty and originality of human existence have been erased." Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 31.

This means a reorientation towards action itself. Reorientation is eliminating an ultimate signified or center in interpretation. Traditionally, the center is thought of as an organizing principle or fixed point that limits the free play of interpretation.³¹⁸ Often understood as God or humanity, the center has taken many forms throughout history.³¹⁹ No matter the form, all points are oriented toward and respond to this center, yet the center sits outside the field of play.³²⁰ Being untouchable, the center serves as a continual reference point. It provides stability and purpose to history, philosophy, texts, actions, and so on. The center sets the rules for the game. However, it goes much further. In addition to setting the rules, the center is the game itself. In addition, the center is not subject to the game's outcome. The outcome has already been determined by the center. The center, Derrida writes, has a "fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play."³²¹

Is this center necessary for interpretation? Even if a center could be determined, how would one engage with it? How can it shape and determine the field of play when it is unknowable and outside the scope of structure and interpretation? Interpretation is like a whirlwind continually swirling around and around. Also like a hurricane, the center is absent and void. The high winds are not in the center of the storm. The action takes place outside the center. The destructive force of the storm is found in the outer bands of wind

³¹⁸ Derrida explains that "[t]he function of this center was not only to orient, balance and organize the structure – one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure – but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure." Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278.

³¹⁹ Derrida asserts that "the entire history of the concept of structure, before the rupture of which we are speaking, must be thought of as series of substitutions of center for center... Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms and names." Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 279.

³²⁰ Derrida writes, "The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center." Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 279.

³²¹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 279.

and rain, while the center remains tranquil and calm. If one were to focus solely on the center, the storm would be missed altogether.

The indeterminate nature of the center suggests that it can be done away with altogether. The nature, state, and purpose of the center cannot be agreed upon. As such there should not be so much effort to interpret around it.³²² It is like trying to play a game when no one can agree on what rules to follow.

In order to play the game, decentering works as a process of interpretation. Instead of substituting the center, one eliminates it. In the place of the center is an exchange of signifiers without a signified.³²³ Derrida makes the case that the signifier “must be abandoned as a metaphysical concept.”³²⁴ The signifier needs to be a concept of play. The removal of the metaphysical moves interpretation from reductionism to openness. The field of interpretative play is pushed wide open. Signifiers, unlike the center, cannot be exhausted.³²⁵ Signifiers function as a supplementary, thus there is always something more.³²⁶ The absence of a center adds to meaning rather than taking it

³²² Thus, “The substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it. Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play...everything became discourse.” Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 280.

³²³ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 279.

³²⁴ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 281.

³²⁵ In other words, “[t]he movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified.” Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 289. Signification is never fixed because it is “floating.” It is not a fixed concept, rather it is continually on the move. Because it is floating, there is never a lack of things that can be said about it.

³²⁶ This more, Derrida maintains, is supplementarity. He says “that this movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin, is the movement of *supplementarity*. One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign...occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*.” Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 289.

away. Meaning is found the absence of meaning.³²⁷ Deconstruction functions in this paradox.

Decentering is a manner of renewing interpretive play. Play lives in the absence of presence. When the center is established, play is pushed aside. In order for play to occur, it needs freedom and empty space.³²⁸ Play requires freedom in order to explore without repercussions, and empty space is used to test and try out new interpretations. Due to its supplementary nature, play moves between presence and absence.³²⁹ Play drives the movement between signifiers, creating an endless action of substitutions between terms.³³⁰

This is not a matter of introducing play into interpretation. Play makes interpretation possible. Derrida claims that play is confirmed “before the alternative of presence and absence.”³³¹ Embracing play means moving past talk of centers and foundations.³³² It means ending the quest to decipher the center, as if that is only where truth resides. Play is a risk and gamble for the unexpected in interpretation. It is much like walking a tight rope across a great chasm. One cannot count on there being a safety

³²⁷ The *overabundance* of the signifier, its supplementary character, is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*.” Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 290.

³²⁸ According to Françoise Dastur, “[p]lay needs something like an empty space in order to be set free, that is, in order for it to have a field of infinite substitutions, where each signified is able to become in turn a signifier.” Françoise Dastur, “Play and Messianicity: The Question of Time and History in Derrida’s Deconstruction,” in *A Companion to Derrida*, eds. Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 191.

³²⁹ “Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of difference and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence.” Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 292.

³³⁰ Dastur describes play as “always the interplay of presence and absence, because it is what allows the substitution of one term by another one, the supplement of one term by another one, the supplement of one term through another one.” Dastur, “Play and Messianicity,” 191.

³³¹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 292.

³³² Dastur explains that “[p]resence and absence are *functions* of play, as well as are subject, center, and origin, which, for Derrida, have nothing other than a functional value. Dastur, “Play and Messianicity,” 191.

net in case of falling.³³³ Getting to where one has never been requires letting go of the comfort and security of what is already know. In interpretation one is faced with two irreconcilable choices. One can choose to search for centers and metaphysical foundations or choose play.³³⁴

Centers and foundations are rarely content with their given space. They have the tendency to gather more and more space until becoming absolutes. As absolutes, they dominate the field, and consequently control all available space. They create an indomitable boundary that clouds all theoretical and interpretative judgments. Across all fields of knowledge, centers and foundations grab more power than their entitled.³³⁵ In order for play to flourish, it needs room to meander and explore.

Difference

Play lives and thrives in difference, yet this difference is unexpected. It is not the limiting difference of structuralism. Structuralist difference, for example, is methodological. It is based on a system of differences. Things are distinguished from one

³³³ See when Derrida claims that “[interpretation] plays without security. For there is a *sure* play: that which is limited to the *substitution* of *given* and *existing, present*, pieces. In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to *genetic* indetermination, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace.” Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 292. In order for play to occur, one ought to embrace chance and indetermination. One has no idea what will be found. The “DNA” of the interpreted remains un-sequenced. One has no idea what genetic “mutations” might appear.

³³⁴ Derrida writes that there are “two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man [sic] and humanism, the name of man [sic] being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology – in other words, throughout his [sic] entire history – *has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play* [italics in the original].” Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 292.

³³⁵ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 18-34. From Aristotle to Newton, Hawking shows how absolutes throughout history have generally proved to be incorrect. General relativity and quantum theory have both deconstructed the idea of space and time remaining fixed.

another based on identity, which in turn are based on their difference to other identities.³³⁶ Identity is a negative quality, having no substantial positive implications. As such, things are known by what they are not. A structuralist account is much like a dictionary, signs are only recognizable because their difference to other signs. Knowledge is reduced to a system of relations, and nothing can escape this structure.³³⁷ It is like being caught in the infinite horizon of a black hole. No idea, word, or concept can escape the differential causality. Truth suffers in this system because any positive assertion is based on a negative one.

Deconstruction does not advocate such a negative view.³³⁸ Structuralist difference has no interest in truth. Structuralism abandons any truth beyond its system of relations.³³⁹ When everything is a system of differences, then play is completely abandoned. Terms, ideas, actions, and so on become fixed and therefore stagnate. Difference depends on the system, thus becoming a slave to the system.³⁴⁰

³³⁶ Claire Colebrook explains that for a structuralist, the “account of difference is primarily methodological: if we want to study a language or any other social structure it is more fruitful to look at the ways systems generate differences, rather than assume that various structures simply label the same common reality.” Claire Colebrook, “Difference,” in *A Companion to Derrida*, eds. Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 59.

³³⁷ To explain this structure Colebrook says, “We could only have the concept of ‘cat’ because we have a practice of differentiating among animals, and – in turn – of differentiating animals from humans and so on. Those differences between terms are negations, and we never arrive at anything positive, anything that simply *is*.” Colebrook, “Difference,” 61.

³³⁸ Colebrook thinks that “it is possible to note that some of the dismissive claims made about deconstruction – that it abandons truth, meaning, and reality to focus on the free play of difference – are far from accurate.” Colebrook, “Difference,” 60.

³³⁹ Colebrook explains that “Derrida poses two objections to this acceptance of negative or relative difference. We cannot, without contradiction, abandon claims to truth and remain within a system of differences. The structuralist claim that one might look at systems in relation to each other, without any sense of what might be true above and beyond any system, is itself a truth claim.” Colebrook, “Difference,” 60.

³⁴⁰ Colebrook writes that “there can be a difference between two identities only if there is some system, network, or field of relations (such as language, consciousness, or even a space in which beings are distributed so that they might differ from each other).” Colebrook, “Difference,” 57.

Abandoning truth and abandoning the center are not equal. Deconstruction is concerned with opening structures and systems. Deconstruction has something more mysterious in mind when referring to the endless play of signifiers, substitution, and reference. Colebrook explains that deconstruction's difference refers "to the difference from which systems of difference emerge."³⁴¹ In deconstruction, difference is the play that occurs before, between, and after concepts. Difference is a process of unraveling the systems of construction. It directs one towards what is happening in the presence and non-presence of things and events.³⁴²

Différance

Deconstruction's response to structuralism is not stronger concepts, but weaker ones. In fact, it offers something so weak that it cannot be called a concept at all. It is Derrida's idea of *différance*.³⁴³ *Différance* is neither a word nor a concept, meaning it expresses a state between speaking and writing.³⁴⁴ *Différance* comes before expression and has no form or being. Moreover, it has no existence, granting it the freedom to

³⁴¹ Colebrook, "Difference," 61.

³⁴² Colebrook writes that "[w]hat Derrida is aiming to articulate is a non-identical or differing time that is not yet organized into before and after, and a space that does not have a centered point of view synthesized into a here and there." Colebrook, "Difference," 65.

³⁴³ Shepherd writes, "At the heart of Derridean deconstruction is the idea of *différance*, a word coined by Derrida, which is itself a pun of the French word "*différer*." In French, the word *différer* has two meanings: to *differ* and to *defer*, and thus, Derrida's invented word is illustrative of his understanding of language: that words have multiple meanings encapsulated within themselves, and that in each context one of these meanings has to be deferred." Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, 48.

³⁴⁴ Derrida explains that *différance* "belongs neither to the voice nor to writing in the usual sense, and which is located, as a strange space...*between* speech and writing, and beyond the tranquil familiarity which links us to one and the other, occasionally reassuring us in our illusion that they are two." Jacques Derrida, *The Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5.

exceed all things as the least of all things.³⁴⁵ The changing of *e* to an *a*³⁴⁶ is no mere linguistic trick,³⁴⁷ it represents the anti-concept, the insensible, and the un-intelligible. It is the quintessential “fuzzy” term, bordering on being both utterly ridiculous and completely brilliant. As being both non-conceptual and non-categorical, it is perhaps both. Its realm is no realm at all, *Différance* lives in the in-between spaces and far away space bordering on meaning and meaninglessness.³⁴⁸

This non-existent concept, being that which no weaker can be conceived, unsettles the settled. What *différance* does, or rather undoes, are foundationalist principles that view the world without interpretative lenses.³⁴⁹ It challenges attempts that dismiss signs as arbitrary to a predefined center or its equivalent.³⁵⁰ Attempts that bypasses signs in order to find the nature, cause, or source of things. As a result, signs are treated as substitutes, functioning as place holders. The sign has nothing to say for itself,

³⁴⁵ Derrida claims that *différance* “does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything *that it is not*, that is, *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent.” Derrida continues by stating that *différance* “is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological - ontotheological - reappropriation, but as very opening of the space in which ontotheology – philosophy – produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing and exceeding it without return.” Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 6.

³⁴⁶ For example, Derrida describes the *a* of *différance* as referring “to the generative movement in the play of differences. The latter are neither fallen from the sky nor inscribed once and for all in a closed system, a static structure that a synchronic ad taxonomic operation could exhaust.” Jacques Derrida, *Positions* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 27.

³⁴⁷ Gary Gutting clarifies that “*différance* is not just an orthographical trick or joke. Derrida is now using it as a term that refers to linguistic differences that cannot be expressed in either speech or writing, so that it itself can be said to be somehow ‘beyond’ both speech and writing.” Gary Gutting, “The Obscurity of ‘Différance,’” in *A Companion to Derrida*, eds. Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 74.

³⁴⁸ According to Gutting, “Derrida is blunt in letting us know that there will be no exposition, no explanation in familiar terms, of *différance*. All he is prepared to offer us is a vocabulary that walks the edge of contradiction or meaninglessness, precisely because it concerns what lies beyond consistency and meaning, beyond presence.” Gutting, “The Obscurity of ‘Différance,’” 75.

³⁴⁹ Gutting believes that Derrida “is rejecting the idea of foundational experience that gives us the world just as it is in itself, free of any interpretation through concepts and/or language.” Gutting, “The Obscurity of Différance,” 78.

³⁵⁰ Derrida explains that “[a]ccording to this classical semiology, the substitution of the sign for the thing itself is both *secondary* and *provisional*.” Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 9.

and thus defers its presence to another.³⁵¹ Signs not only defer, but also differ. A sign's identity is built in part on its difference to other signs. The structuralist is partially correct. Signs differ, that is they distinguish themselves from other signs.

Presence and Absence

Problems arise when one spends too much time on either side of defer and differ. Both defer and differ tend towards reductionism. Defer treats signs as arbitrary and illusions of the real. Differ traps signs in categorization. *Différance*, on the other hand, does something unique. Because the French verb *différer* can mean both “differ” and “defer,” *différance* represents the much forgotten middle voice.³⁵² Philosophy has traditionally lived in the active or the passive.³⁵³ Philosophy is active in its use of propositions and confident declarations. For philosophy, the active represents the idea of presence. Philosophy asserts truth, beauty, goodness, and so on. The passive represents philosophy's negative aspects, such as *apophatic* or negative theology. The negative emphasizes what is not known or can never be known. Absence, rather than presence, becomes the dominate feature. *Différance*, with its distinctive middle voice, represents both and neither. It expresses what lives between presence and absence. The middle voice has elements of the active and passive, but is neither. *Différance* is not an active agent. It

³⁵¹ Derrida writes that “[t]he sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, ‘thing’ here standing equally from meaning or referent. The sign represent the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present...the sign, in this sense, is deferred presence.” Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 9.

³⁵² According to Derrida, “We must consider that in the usage of our language the ending *-ance* remains undecided *between* the active and the passive. And we will see why that which lets itself be designated *différance* is neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like the middle voice.” Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 9.

³⁵³ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 9.

does not do things to signs, actions, words, and so on. *Différance* is not a presence now absent.³⁵⁴

Différance is the condition or possibility of differential play. It suggests a space where differences play.³⁵⁵ *Différance* is not the cause of these differences. It does not direct difference. *Différance* is the undefined play between the signs.³⁵⁶ Caputo describes it as a “quasi-condition of possibility.”³⁵⁷ This demonstrates why *différance* cannot be a word or a concept. Descriptions are too strong for it. *Différance* suggests and allows instead of demanding and prescribing. Its traits are weak. *Différance* is an unsettling presence that upsets and questions structures, ideas, and traditions. Its intent is not to destroy, but to open these concepts toward truth.³⁵⁸ *Différance* is far less like a bull in a china shop and more akin to a fleeting glimpse at the corner of one’s eye. By the time one turns to look, it is already gone.

Différance does not provide easy answers. It is meant to be frustrating. Its game is disorder.³⁵⁹ *Différance* is not going to abide by the traditional rules. *Différance* is going to

³⁵⁴ Describing its middle voice, Derrida describes *différance* as “neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like the middle voice, saying an operation that is not an operation, an operation that cannot be conceived either as passion or as the action of a subject on an object.” Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 9.

³⁵⁵ See for example when Jacques Derrida describes *différance* as “the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the *spacing* by means of which elements are related to each other.” Derrida, *Positions*, 27.

³⁵⁶ This is described by Derrida as a “playing movement that ‘produces’ – by means of something that is not simply an activity – these difference, these effects of difference.” Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 11.

³⁵⁷ John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 102.

³⁵⁸ To clarify, Derrida explains “that the production of difference, *différance*, is not astructural: it produces systematic and regulated transformations which are able, at a certain point, to leave room for a structural science.” *Positions*, 28. Derrida, *Différance* does not suggest that structures cannot exist. Instead it leads one towards transforming those structures, especially when those structures overpower other possibilities.

³⁵⁹ *Différance* is meant to be difficult. As Caputo describes it, “*différance* imposes upon us all the necessity to work out meaning and reference by the work, sweat, and pain of the “play” (some fun!) of differences.” Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 103.

push for continual play between ideas, things, and actions. It is the space making room for the unexpected to emerge. *Différance* allows for the breakdown of powerful thoughts, like metaphysics, so that one can again be surprised.³⁶⁰ If *différance* was only a method of destroying things, then it could be dismissed out of hand. If its job was deconstruction for the sake of deconstruction, then there would be no reason to take it seriously. *Différance* has no such ambitions. Behind its perceived madness is a deep desire for truth and authenticity. It seeks for truth and authenticity underneath the many layers of power and authority. *Différance* stands in opposition to power structures, traditions, and institutions that bury truth.³⁶¹ *Différance* provides the conditions for openness and challenge. Openness will not be denied, being the most important factor.³⁶² *Différance* does the dirty unwanted work no one else wants. It takes on the role of the “bad guy.” Openness requires challenges to those who may not be willing to give up their power.³⁶³

Différance does not make appearances. There is no visible evidence left behind in its wake. There is no such thing as a sighting of *différance*. It is much too elusive, too weak to be seen. *Différance* has no domain of its own. *Différance* does not replace

³⁶⁰ Gutting writes that “[d]ifférance, as Derrida portrays it, seems to be that which undermines presence by introducing the contrary characteristics of negativity, incompleteness, complexity, dependence, and derivation, thereby compromising the ‘integrity’ of metaphysical and epistemological presence.” Gutting, “Obscurity of Différance,” 78.

³⁶¹ *Différance* by its very nature is subversive, but subversive in the name of weakness. As Caputo explains that “the very idea of *différance*, if it is an idea, is the idea of no more reigning, no more sovereigns, no more kingdoms, not now, not ever. *Différance* is the very idea of instigating the subversion of kingdoms wherever they appear.” John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 26.

³⁶² There needs to be openness in order for the integrity of the game to be preserved. The job of *différance*, according to Caputo is to “establish the conditions which make possible our beliefs and our practices, our traditions and our institutions, and no less to make them impossible, which means to see to it that they do not effect closure, to keep them open so that something new or different may happen.” Derrida, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 12.

³⁶³ *Différance* can be antagonistic. *Différance*, Caputo writes, “is neutral by being uniformly nasty about letting vocabularies establish their credentials and get set in place, as if they really were making good in some strong sense on their claims. Its neutrality lies in its unremitting and unbiased antagonism, which does not single out theologians for particular abuse but which is equally hostile to all ontological claims, across the board.” Derrida, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 14.

metaphysics. Its intent is not to replace one tyrant with another. Derrida describes *différance* as something without authority or control. He writes:

It is not a present being, however excellent, unique, principal, or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. It is not announced by any capital letter. Not only is there no kingdom of *différance*, but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening, and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of a kingdom. And it is always in the name of a kingdom that one may reproach *différance* with wishing to reign, believing that one sees it aggrandize itself with a capital letter.³⁶⁴

Différance does not announce itself. Being other than presence or absence, it lacks the ability to announce itself. *Différance* does not establish systems, nor does it reign over chaos.³⁶⁵ It does not establish a kingdom of chaos in opposition to order. This would be counter to the character of *différance*. A kingdom remains a kingdom whether it is order or chaos. Chaos for the sake of chaos is never the purpose of *différance*. Chaos and unlawfulness often favors the powerful at the expense of the weak.³⁶⁶

Absence causes as many problems as presence. Both presence and absence are strong concepts. Absence is another form of power. A presence is missed when one is absent. One knows that someone or something should be present. In the absence of that

³⁶⁴ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 22.

³⁶⁵ Caputo makes it clear that “by advocating *différance* Derrida does not advocate outright chaos. He does not favor a simple-minded street-corner anarchy (nothing is ever simple) that would let lawlessness sweep over the land.” Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 27.

³⁶⁶ Power remains power whether it is organized or chaos. Caputo maintains that Derrida does not advocate for lawlessness. He writes “[chaos] would amount to nothing more than a simple counter-kingdom, a reign of lawlessness, where lawlessness and unchecked violence rule... The power of powerlessness is neither pure power nor pure powerlessness.” Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 27.

presence, anxiety can be induced. There should be something there, but it is not. There can be a presence of absence, where thought and action is dominated by this absence. In order to compensate, negative theology establishes a higher level or order. Absence points to something even greater and more powerful than before.³⁶⁷ *Différance* is therefore the alternative to both presence and absence. It makes the case that one does not need bigger concepts, systems, structures, and so on.³⁶⁸ The kingdom of *différance* is described by Caputo as being “organized around the power of the powerless, by forces that are weak, not strong.”³⁶⁹

Trace

Différance is a trace between presence and absence. Trace is the self-erasure of *différance*. It erases presence and functions as a check against *différance* itself. Trace keeps *différance* from being any more than presence or absence.³⁷⁰ It is the anti-metaphysical nature of *différance*.³⁷¹ Trace represents undecidability in language and interpretation.³⁷² It works within *différance* in order to keep things open. Trace keeps actions, thoughts, and ideas in flux. It suggests that things remain unfinished and

³⁶⁷ Though negative theology is helpful, it is not deconstruction’s goal. Caputo explains that “deconstruction is no negative theology. That is because negative theology is always a higher, more refined way of affirming that God exists, or hyperexists, or exists-by-not-existing.” Derrida, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 7. Negative theology is helpful in countering the abuse of metaphysics. Deconstruction can therefore use negative theology to a point. They both have similar methods, but different goals.

³⁶⁸ Caputo believes that “Derrida does not discredit negative theology, but gives us an alternative, non-metaphysical, non-ousiological, or hyper-ousiological way.” Derrida, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 60.

³⁶⁹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 29.

³⁷⁰ To explain this, Derrida writes that [n]othing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.” *Positions*, 26.

³⁷¹ The trace, according to Derrida, is that which “can never be presented: that is, which profoundly links fundamental ontology and phenomenology. Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself.” Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 23.

³⁷² Caputo, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 57.

incomplete. Trace encourages one to remain lost in the flux of ideas and embrace the “quasi-transcendental open-endedness.”³⁷³ Deconstruction is the decision to live in this flux and embrace the self-erasing trace.³⁷⁴ *Différance* and trace remind one that interpretation is never final.

Complicating Reference

Différance, itself unnameable, represent the unnameable and unexpected in interpretation. It has no name because it is not a thing or being, nor does it have an essence.³⁷⁵ Being unnameable, *différance* suggests the possibility of hermeneutics without metaphysics. It eliminates the need to invoke some presence or absence in order to interpret.³⁷⁶ Interpretation does not require a reference point outside the scope of what is interpreted. Ritual action has no “ghost in the machine,” as if ritual action is empty until filled by an unknown essence.

Différance complicates reference. It complicates reference so that reference can remain open.³⁷⁷ *Différance* does not escape the chain of difference and deferment.³⁷⁸ It

³⁷³ Caputo, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 58

³⁷⁴ Trace is not presence at all. Derrida describes trace as “the simulacrum of presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site - erasure belongs to its structure.” *Margins of Philosophy*, 24.

³⁷⁵ Derrida clarifies that there is no *name* for [*différance*] at all, not even the name of essence or of Being.” Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 26.

³⁷⁶ Gutting explains that Derrida “is trying to develop a language to replace (or at least oppose) the traditional philosophical languages built around presence. This language flows from ‘*différance*’ a term designed to escape from and undermine the allegedly fundamental distinctions of traditional philosophy.” Gutting, “The Obscurity of ‘*Différance*,’” 87. Gutting follows with a critique with Derrida’s use of *différance*. He makes the case that *différance* could easily become another metaphysic. *Différance* could become a language of ultimate truth as easily as it protects one from the illusion of ultimate truth. In Derrida, Gutting sees a tendency towards the former. It is therefore helpful to remember that always one walks a fine line between both presence and absence. One is always faces the temptation of powerful concepts and ideas. *Différance* is no different. Used incorrectly *différance* could become a tyrant, yet the unnameable it represents resists such usage.

³⁷⁷ See for example when Caputo writes “[d]econstruction means to complicate reference, not to deny it; it insists that there is no reference without difference.” Caputo, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 17.

³⁷⁸ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 26.

embraces both so that reference can remain open and alive. When Derrida writes, “[t]here is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; *il n’y pas hors-texte*]³⁷⁹ this is not meant to be limiting. It is not an endorsement of an extreme textuality such as biblical literalism. *Différance* is meant to be liberating. Derrida’s statement affirms that nothing lives outside context. Reference cannot be limited to a dictionary, as if difference could be codified independent of context. Nothing can retreat into a world outside reference. One cannot bracket off terms and concepts so that they remain untouchable. This Platonic ideal presupposes a perfect realm where concepts reign free from the corrupting influence of context.³⁸⁰ Actions, words, events, and ideas always remain bound to context, which is another way of saying relationship. Context and reference are a commitment to relationship. Everything remains connected to the other.³⁸¹ Nothing stands in itself as if in a perfect state. This emphasis on context prevents metaphysical abuses that devalue activities such as ritual action.

***Différance* Towards Difference**

Différance is hard to understand. It does not lend itself to easy explanations or unchanging principles. As a weak concept, *différance* is precisely not a transcendental puppet master. It does not command from above. *Différance* is content with allowing the repetition of difference to happen. It provides the fertile ground for keeping difference alive and growing. *Différance* does not create difference because it lacks the power to do

³⁷⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

³⁸⁰ See Smith when he explains this as meaning “[t]here is no ‘access’ to either the world or ourselves which is not subject to the differing and deferrals of difference; as such, the world and even consciousness are never simply of fully ‘present.’ Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, 44-45.

³⁸¹ According to Smith, “Derrida sketches a subject who is constituted by a relation to an exteriority – the alterity of the Other in the communal networks of signification.” Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, 45.

so. Though weak, it challenges the strong and powerful. It allows the *not* to challenge the *what is*.³⁸² In and of itself, *différance* points to something that is already happening within things, actions, language, and so on. Caputo explains that “[d]ifference is not the external, the accidental, but a kind of a priori which inhabits things from the start.”³⁸³ Difference is not something imposed onto things. Instead, it is a part of the interpreted’s “DNA.”

Difference is a constant movement back and forth as things continual refer to one another. Difference is a movement of repetition. *Différance* is somewhere within this repetition, constantly encouraging movement. *Différance* is the small voice urging one to play with terms and meanings. It is continual “yes...and” in interpretation. *Différance* is life within the “flux.”³⁸⁴ Flux being idea that things are never fixed, but instead remain unfinished.³⁸⁵

Différance is a commitment to openness. It abandons comfortable interpretations for hard ones. Its approach is one of continual anxiety.³⁸⁶ The task of interpretation is

³⁸² Here one is reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul when he writes, “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 1 Cor. 1:26-29. This is the spirit of deconstruction. It makes room for the “not.” It chooses the “not” over the things that are. *Différance* opens one towards the “not.”

³⁸³ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 130.

³⁸⁴ Flux is a term often used by Caputo to describe the undetermined nature of interpretation. Caputo writes that in difference “this ‘not’ is built right in, that it is no merely temporary inconvenience which we hope to remove by the first of the month. It recognizes that we are caught up in the flux, breached by the ‘not,’ that the only honest thing to do, indeed the only thing to do at all, honest or not, is press forward.” Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 130.

³⁸⁵ Caputo writes that “the thesis of de(con)structibility of the world means that whatever unities of meaning are constituted in natural languages, whatever normalized form experience assumes, whatever institutionalization our practices receive, all are alike vulnerable, alterable, contingent. They have not fallen from the sky; they are structurally, eidetically vulnerable, however much they have tended to gain acceptance.” Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 144.

³⁸⁶ This state, Caputo describes, is the “*readiness* for this anxiety and solicitation, the readiness to be shaken, the openness for *différance*.” Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 146.

burdensome because it is never done. There will always be more to discover as the small voice eternally whispers “good, but not yet.” This is why *différance* is needed for approaching ritual action. It leads one toward an open and honest engagement with the actions. Hermeneutics initiates the conversation, but deconstruction leads one further into the conversation. Deconstruction rightly sees that the conversation cannot and should not end.³⁸⁷ For ritual action this means a commitment to action’s conversation.

Deconstruction provides ways of listening to differences at play. It allows the conversation to live on its own without the heavy handedness of strong concepts like metaphysics, presence, absence, and so on. Difference and *différance* suggest that weakness is the best approach to ritual action. Interpretation should begin from the bottom. It has to be a process that engages the ambiguities and complexities of ritual action.

In practice, this means engaging with those who perform ritual action. It is a process that listens carefully to participants’ everyday thoughts, experience, and opinions concerning the ritual action itself. It is an immersion and submission into the heart of ritual action itself. This listening seeks to understand ritual action on its own terms, without forcing it into strong categories such as metaphysics or structuralism. It is listening for the sake of listening. However, listening on its own is not enough. One is required to go even further. In *différance*, one embraces ambiguity, searches for complexity, and plays with difference. *Différance* provides the space for engaging all the various elements of ritual action. It encourages play between personal experience and

³⁸⁷ As Caputo explains, “a hermeneutic comes to pass only in the element of movement and *kinesis*, and it requires ceaseless deconstructive vigilance to ‘maintain’ itself there, so that it will not get off at the first stop.” Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 147.

tradition, language and action, spiritual and mundane, and so on. It pushes beyond just a description of ritual action. *Différance* wants one to live in it. Living *différance* requires facing complexities, strangeness, and mystery. The goal is not to solve it like one would a puzzle. Ritual action is not a problem needing an explanation. It is not a machine that needs to be disassembled. *Différance* has no interest in such trivialities. It pushes for questions not answers. It asks one to think without the end. *Différance* opens one to the event.

Event

Différance does not help one see ritual action. If this were the case there would be no need for *différance*. One could rely solely on a number of methods ranging from ritual study to ethnography. These methods help one see what is happening. While this is necessary, *différance* does not add to this process. It encourages one to go further into the ritual action itself. It opens the space to see not only what is happening, but what is occurring *in the happening itself*. *Différance* points one towards the event.³⁸⁸

The event is the undefinable, undetermined, and unexpected occurring in ritual action. One cannot point to it and say “here it is!” The event is not identifiable in a tangible way. One cannot describe it as a part of a structure or sequence. Like *différance*, events lack a real, defined presence.³⁸⁹ Having no presence, events are not added to ritual action. Events do not come from above or outside ritual action. They are not a foreign substance spliced into ritual action's “genetic code.” Thus events do not stand apart from

³⁸⁸ Event is defined by Caputo as “not what happens, which is what the word suggests in English, but something going on *in* what happens, something that is expressed or realized or given shape in what happens.” “Spectral Hermeneutics: On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event,” in John D. Caputo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffery W. Robbins (Columbia University Press: New York, 2007), 47.

³⁸⁹ Caputo clarifies that “it is not something present, but something seeking to make itself felt in what is present.” Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” 47.

ritual action. Like *différance*, event has no home to call its own. Because it is weak, it is stuck between presence and absence. It has no power to announce itself. Where *différance* suggests play with what is, event points to what is happening *within* the what is.

Name and Event

Events have no realm or place of their own. An event cannot be found apart from the names that contain them. Names and events have a symbiotic relationship. Names are structured forms. They provide tried and true patterns that one can identify. From actions to texts, names can consist of a variety of different things. Caputo describes names as “historical, contingent, provisional expressions in natural languages.”³⁹⁰ A name is something one uses to help identify a person, place, or thing. It gives one a sense of control. Naming a phenomenon is the first step towards understanding it. It is naturally the first question people ask when meeting new people. Knowing someone's name stabilizes the situation. One may know nothing about the other person, there is nonetheless a sense of comfort that comes from knowing a name. Without the name there is a nagging sense of incompleteness. One needs to be identifiable. One has to have a name! This is that same concern Moses had when he encountered God through the burning bush. Moses needed to know God's name for himself and the Israelites.³⁹¹

Names are strong terms. They represent far more than personal labels. Names point to the known. They establish the limit of what is known, for one cannot name what is unknown. Names consist of the traditions, texts, and actions that comprise the observable and predictable. Names help to mark and organize the past. They are crucial

³⁹⁰ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 48.

³⁹¹ *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Ex. 3:13-14.

for identify the *what* of what has happened. Names can represent the powerful, and thus mark important institutions and occurrences of the past. Names also carry historical baggage. The names of institutions carry a variety of meanings.³⁹² For example, the names “White House,” “Catholic Church,” and “Wall Street” suggest power, honor, and even corruption. Names are also conditional, with a defined set of boundaries.³⁹³ A name such as the “White House” represents a stable institution and carries with it an agreed upon definition. Its definition is based on its function.

Though names represent stability, they contain the unstable event. A name is never just a name. Within it moves something both miraculous and wonderful. Events move within names since events occur in traditions, institutions, history, and the like. The event is what draws one to the name in the first place. They provide an unquantifiable factor that leaves one grasped or pulled in the presence of the name.³⁹⁴ One already knows what to expect with a name. Being defined and historical conditioned, it leaves very little room for the unexpected. Yet events are the moment of surprise within the name. Coming from nowhere, events provide the unexpected joy or thrill when encountering the supposedly stable.³⁹⁵

³⁹² Caputo writes that “[n]ames can accumulate historical power and worldly prestige and have very powerful institutions erected in or under their name, getting themselves carved in stone, whereas the voice of events is ever soft and low and is liable to be dismissed, distorted, or ignored.” Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 2.

³⁹³ According to Caputo, names “belong to conditioned and coded strings of signifiers.” Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 2.

³⁹⁴ One is drawn to the name by the event within it. Caputo describes events as “provocations and promises, and they have the structure of what Derrida calls the unforeseeable ‘to come.’” Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” 48.

³⁹⁵ An event, according to Caputo, “is something we cannot see coming that takes us by surprise, like a letter that arrives unexpectedly in the mail with news that changes your life for ever, for better or for worse.” Caputo, *Truth*, 75.

Event is the unexplainable grasp, some might say conviction, one feels when observing or participating in a worship service. It has no limits, and it can occur anywhere at any time. Thus, the most moving experiences do not, necessarily occur at a “proper time.” Indeed, it is often not the predetermined “events” that are moving but the unintentional ones. One might encounter the event in a spoken word, an image, a movement, or even the comical. Religious activities, like ritual action, are obvious candidates for events to occur. However, events are not limited to predefined “religious” activity. The beauty of the event, having no defined presence, is that it has no limits. A simple drive around town, talks with friends, and even walking down the aisle of the local grocery store are all candidates for the unexpected. Events can occur in the most unlikely of circumstances.³⁹⁶ Life itself seems designed around such moments of extreme astonishment.³⁹⁷

Though unexpected, the event leaves one in a state Rudolf Otto describes as the “*mysterium tremendum*.”³⁹⁸ The words *mysterium*³⁹⁹ and *tremendum*⁴⁰⁰ indicate the

³⁹⁶ “Daily life is full of such unexpected events, sometimes very subtle, like an aside by a teacher that changes the course of a student’s life. The teacher does not know this has happened and at the time neither does the student. That is the event.” Caputo, *Truth*, 75.

³⁹⁷ For example, Cupitt describes the universe as “just one great Event (or pulse), a vast explosion of energy still slowly scattering and dying. It is not, as they say, ‘going anywhere’; it’s going everywhere, and its history does not fulfil any purpose.” Cupitt, *The Fountain*, 24. Of course, the question of purpose is debatable. What is important, however, is this idea of event as being cosmic. The big bang itself is most miraculous and unexpected. The universe itself is built for the surprise and wonder. It would make sense that human life is also uniquely prepared for surprise and wonder.

³⁹⁸ Rudolf Otto describes the state of *mysterium tremendum* as a feeling that “may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its ‘profane’, non-religious mood of everyday experience.” Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 12.

³⁹⁹ According to Otto, “*mysterium* denotes merely that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception of understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar.” Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 13.

⁴⁰⁰ *Tremendum* is related to *tremor* or fear. This is not fear in the normal sense, but the stirring of ‘something uncanny’, ‘eerie’, or ‘weird’. It is this feeling which, emerging in the mind of primeval

simultaneous state of being enchanted by both mystery and fear. This is a state of overwhelming mystery and awe that comes on suddenly and without warning. It can be very gentle. It is like being taken by the hand and guided towards experiences never felt before. Such events can be calming, providing comfort and security. At other times the event comes on suddenly and without warning. The event is strange, as if one is being “pushed” from the known to the unknown. Otto calls this “creature-feeling,”⁴⁰¹ referring to the sense of awe one has when encountering the event. Tillich calls it the experience of “ultimate concern.”⁴⁰² Events are moments of feeling grasped by the unknown. It is the experience of being “consumed” by the other.

The event has an element of the unintelligible. It is unlike anything else and is therefore beyond comparison. The event “thrives” on the edge of reason. It continually plays on the mind.⁴⁰³ At times one may believe that it can be held and identified. The event itself provides one hope that it can be grasped in some manner or form.⁴⁰⁴

Ultimately the event cannot be grasped fully. Names may carry events within them, but

[human], forms the starting-point for the entire religious development in history.” Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 14.

⁴⁰¹ Otto writes that creature-feeling “is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures.” Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 10. Otto describes this creature-feeling as an encounter with divine. There is no need to make that connection yet. Now it is enough to say that an encounter with an event is also an encounter with one’s finitude. Events can make one acutely aware of one’s own existence and mortality.

⁴⁰² Ultimate concern is a total act of the self. It is that which concerns one ultimately. Tillich describes it as that which “is unconditional, independent of any conditions of character, desire, or circumstance. The unconditional concern is total: no part of ourselves or of our world is excluded from it; there is no ‘place’ to flee from it.” Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume I*, 12. Events affect the total self. The thus cannot be reasoned away or described as only feelings. Events instead act on the whole person, therefore, they are difficult to dismiss or explain away.

⁴⁰³ Otto uses the phrase “wholly other” to describe an event “which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the ‘canny’, and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment.” Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 26.

⁴⁰⁴ Otto’s own project holds on to this hope that the event does not escape rationality. He writes that “though it eludes the conceptual way of understanding, it must be in some way or other within our grasp, else absolutely nothing could be asserted of it.” Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2.

these names are not complete translations of events. A careful distinction needs to be made between the historical contingency of names and the ahistorical event happening within.

Exceeding the Name

Names seek to understand the event. They attempt to translate the event in order to understand it. This translation is a never ending historical process of engagement with the event. Names are temporary and never meant to be for all time. They change with the times as new generations attempt to understand the event housed within the name.⁴⁰⁵ Names are therefore the caretakers of the event. They are given the very special task of carrying and evoking the event itself. Names provide that initial “push” so that things can get started.⁴⁰⁶ They prepare one for the event at which point they slip away into the background.

Names are special because they provide a point of engagement with the event. Names bring a concrete manifestation to an ever-evolving event. Thus the name should never be mistaken for the event itself. One should not create systems out of names. Events resist systematization. Events seek to escape the limiting boundaries of systematic thinking. Names are and should be deconstructible.⁴⁰⁷ Names do not have the final say, for the event is never bound to a name.

⁴⁰⁵ Names are translatable according to Caputo. As he puts it, “[n]ames are endlessly translatable, whereas events are what names are trying to translate.” Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 3.

⁴⁰⁶ Caputo writes that “[n]ames are asked to carry what they cannot bear toward a destination they do not know. Names are trying to make things happen, while events are what is happening.” Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 3.

⁴⁰⁷ Caputo writes that “[w]ords and things are deconstructible, but events...are not deconstructible. Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics, 48.”

Events live in excess.⁴⁰⁸ Within the name, the event pushes against the bounds of the name. Though a name may contain the event, it does so temporarily. The event always moves forward, towards something promised. Uncomfortable with the status quo, the event stirs within the name. This stirring and shaking is not for its own benefit. Events do not deconstruct for the sake of deconstructing. What at first glance appears as deconstruction is actually an invitation.⁴⁰⁹ It is an invitation to consider new possibilities resulting from the play of differences. Event is potential. It is not interested in what has been, but what *can be*.

Events are like a seed within the *what is*. It is hidden away, shifting from place to place. It seeks the right soil to grow and to flourish.⁴¹⁰ It is not a matter of if it will grow, but *when*. It has to, for it carries something of immense importance. Within this seed is something that will forever change the experiences of all who come into its presence. All it needs is room to grow and nutrients to feed it. If conditions will allow, it can grow into something truly magnificent and awe inspiring. From a sapling to a mighty oak, the event reaches to the sky using every ounce of its energy to go further and further. Events change the look and shape of the world they inhabit. Like the oak, they draw one's gaze. They create seemingly sacred moments out of mundane ones. Suddenly, without warning, one encounters that sense of transcendence that brings fullness into being. It is a

⁴⁰⁸ Events, according to Caputo, “overtake us and outstrip the reach of the subject or the ego...The event arises independently of me and comes over me, so that an event is also an *advent*.” Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 4.

⁴⁰⁹ The event is described by Caputo as “something signaling us from afar, something waiting for us to catch up, something inviting, promising, provoking, and let us say, for this is a word that packs a special punch in theology, something *promised*.” Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” 52.

⁴¹⁰ Caputo characterizes events as “tender shoots and saplings, the most vulnerable growths, a nascent and incipient stirring, which postmodern thinking must exert every effort to cultivate and keep safe. Postmodernism is the garden of the event, the thinking of the event, offering events shelter and safe harbor.” Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” 48.

transcendence that makes the trivial special and the sacred inspiring.⁴¹¹ This transcendence does not force one to gaze away, as if to ignore the moment at hand. It allows one to look at the beauty or awe within things themselves.⁴¹² The event, Otto describes, puts one into a “[s]*tupor*...blank wonder, an astonishment that strikes us dumb, amazement absolute [italics in the original].”⁴¹³ This can only be described as an encounter with the infinite.⁴¹⁴ The infinite is the draw of the event.

The event's infinite nature, being both uncontainable and unlimited, is precisely its appeal and source of power. The infinite holds the desire of the human heart.⁴¹⁵ This infinite desire is a desire for something one knows to be ultimate. This is an ultimate one can know and recognize. This is why events are so moving. They are not strange for the sake of being strange. An event's strange and awe inspiring experience is about intense familiarity. It calls one toward the promise all things contain.⁴¹⁶ This is not a promise for a faraway place or distant future. This promise is in the here and now. It stirs within all things, waiting to be unleashed. What waits to be unleashed is nothing other than the way things *should be*. One should be prepared to listen to the event. When the event calls, one

⁴¹¹ Events modify the world around them. Caputo explains that “events take on the specific look or sound or feel of the sacred, when the sparks we experience in words and things are sacred sparks, divine promptings, or holy intensities, then we have stepped upon the terrain of postmodern theology.” Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” 49.

⁴¹² To understand the event, Caputo says, theology must keep “its ear close to the heart of the pulses or pulsations of the divine in things.” Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” 49.

⁴¹³ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 26.

⁴¹⁴ Tillich writes that the “human heart seeks the infinite because that is where the finite wants to rest. In the infinite it sees its own fulfillment. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 13.

⁴¹⁵ As Tillich explains, “[A human] is driven toward faith by his [or her] awareness of the infinite to which he [or she] belongs, but which he [or she] does not own like a possession. This is in abstract terms what concretely appears as the ‘restlessness of the hear’ within the flux of life.” Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 9.

⁴¹⁶ For example, Caputo describes the event as “already ahead of us, always provoking and soliciting us, eternally luring us on with its promise. The truth of the event is its promise to come true.” Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” 55.

needs to be ready to respond with a resounding “yes.”⁴¹⁷ Yet listening is easier said than done. One learns how to listen. It is not a skill reserved only for priests, pastors, or rabbis. In fact, it may be even harder for religious leaders. Entrenchment within an institution makes it much harder to think outside its bounds. The event requires one to let go. In order to listen one ought to let go of the various “names” of systematic, structural, and institutional thought. It means suspending reality, if only for little while, so one can see what is happening *within* the name. If all one can only see the institution, academy, or church then the event will be missed. The “noise” of these various institutions will overpower the still small voice of the event.⁴¹⁸

Knowledge and Desire

The event draws one to the event. Its movement is an eternal referring back and forth movement that never ends. The event wants to be heard. It does not want to remain a mystery. The event wants to be known,⁴¹⁹ and humanity desires to know it.⁴²⁰ One can never be sure about the contents of the desired. One only knows that the desire is there. Desire for what cannot be answered, but the desire *remains* nonetheless.⁴²¹ This desire

⁴¹⁷ Caputo affirms that a “religious faith...takes the form of a ‘yes, yes’ ‘*oui, oui,*’ *within* the general affirmation, the *oui, oui* by which we all respond to the language before language, which must be repeated from moment to moment.” Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 59.

⁴¹⁸ Names are not about containing the event. Caputo explains that “[w]hen something happens that contains an event, it contains precisely what it cannot contain. To exist would mean to exhaust the event, which means the event that is named in or under the name of God can never take final form, can never exist and exhaust itself on the ontical or ontological plane, neither in some highest being up above nor even in Being itself, even as it can never be conceived in some logically adequate expression or concept.” Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” 56.

⁴¹⁹ The event does not wish to remain hidden. Caputo remarks that the event “solicits and calls to us from within what exists, which is why events are a matter of prayers and tears...Prayer has to do with hearing, heeding, and hearkening to a provocation that draws us out of ourselves.” Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” 57.

⁴²⁰ Caputo describes this desire as a lifetime of “hoping, dreaming, sighing for the event, praying and weeping over the event, praying for the coming of the event.” Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” 58.

⁴²¹ Concerning the contents of this desire, this will remain unknown. Caputo writes that “[w]e are all along in the dark about what we desire, about what is desiring us, about what is desiring *in* us.” Caputo, “Spectral Heremeneutics,” 59.

represents the need for connection and experience with something. Desire explains what keeps one coming back to things such as ritual actions. Desire prepares one for the event. It makes one available and ready for what can occur.⁴²² Ritual action, in all its physical, repetitive, and intimate characteristics, carries the event. It carries the heart of human desire.

To fulfill this desire, the event must be known. The experience of the event and its grasp represents an intimate form of knowing. This knowledge goes beyond trivial knowledge or knowledge of a skill. It is a knowledge based on connection, One that overcomes estrangement. It represents union between the event and the other, above all the precise moment of being grasped by the event.⁴²³ Knowledge that “grasps”⁴²⁴ is a deeper experience than knowledge being merely informative or interesting. To be grasped is a deeply personal experience. It brings together the separated. The event reaches out and exceeds the present in order to connect. The event reaches out to overcome a bridge or gulf so that it can be known.⁴²⁵ In this knowledge, the unknown, strange, and even frightening are made familiar. One recognizes that what was strange is no foreign

⁴²² One needs to be prepared for the event. Caputo maintains that one must “make oneself available for the event, to be prepared to be unprepared, to leave oneself unprepared for the unforeseeable.” Caputo, *Truth*, 76.

⁴²³ Tillich describes knowledge as a union. He writes that in the “act of knowledge the knower and that which is known are united; the gap between subject and object is overcome. The subject ‘grasps’ the object, adapts it to itself, and, at the same time, adapts itself to the object.” Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume I, 94.

⁴²⁴ To define this term, Tillich writes that being grasped “means only that we did not produce it, but found it in ourselves. It may have developed gradually, it may sometimes be the result of a dramatic experience. But it does not really occur...through the establishment of a method for achieving it. Paul Tillich, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue*, ed. D. Mackenzie Brown (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 9. There are no prior rules for how the event ought to occur. It does not have to a road to Damascus type experience. The event can be a gentle nudge towards the unexpected. So gentle in fact that one may hardly perceive it at all.

⁴²⁵ Therefore, according to Tillich, “In every act of knowledge want and estrangement are conquered.” Tillich, *Systematic Theology*: Volume I, 95.

invader. Its goal is not to destroy or change experience. No, the event does something much more wonderful. The event is part of the human experience. One is grasped by what comes from within.⁴²⁶

Continuing the Conversation: Ritual Action and the Need for Weakness

Deconstruction is not a successor to metaphysics, semiotics, structuralism, or other methods of engaging ritual action. Deconstruction does not succeed anything, it helps one further the conversation begun by hermeneutics. This use of deconstruction echoes Richard Rorty's use of hermeneutics.⁴²⁷ Like Rorty, deconstruction is a manner of entering conversation rather than establishing grounded rules of conversation. As if conversation needed to be mastered like a science. Deconstruction is not concerned with making conversation fit the mold of "normal" discourse. Not all conversations can be described as normal. Deconstruction accepts that conversation does not always fit the normal. Deconstruction embraces "abnormal discourse."⁴²⁸ Hermeneutics may be the study of abnormal discourse, but deconstruction delves further into the abnormal.⁴²⁹ Unlike hermeneutics, deconstruction does not position itself as normal. Deconstruction immerses itself in the abnormal.

⁴²⁶ For example Tillich explains that "[s]omething which was strange, but which nevertheless belongs to us, has become familiar, a part of us." Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol.I*, 95.

⁴²⁷ See Richard Rorty when he writes, "I am *not* putting hermeneutics forward as a 'successor subject' to epistemology...In the interpretation I shall be offering, 'hermeneutics' is not the name for a discipline, nor for a method of achieving the sort of results which epistemology failed to achieve, nor for a program of research." Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 315.

⁴²⁸ Rorty explains that "normal discourse is that which is conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it. Abnormal discourse is what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these conventions or who sets them aside." Rorty, *Philosophy*, 320. This is the deconstructive spirit. It does not accept "normal" convictions.

⁴²⁹ For example, Rorty writes that "hermeneutics is the study of an abnormal discourse from the point of view of some normal discourse – the attempt to make some sense of what is going on at a stage where we are still too unsure about it to describe it." Rorty, *Philosophy*, 320-321.

This immersion means resisting the urge to fit the abnormal into the normal. It is an honest engagement with the abnormal as abnormal. Deconstruction recognizes that activities, such as ritual action, cannot be categorized as normal. Ritual action, like other abnormal discourse, resists being fitted into semiotic, structuralist, or metaphysical molds. Listening to abnormal discourses, such as ritual action, requires humility. It requires being honest about what is known, can be known, and cannot be known.⁴³⁰ Honesty is listening for the sake of listening. It is the ability to listen to abnormal discourse without letting filters determining the listening itself. This is process of de-centering helps one listen to the stories of ritual action.⁴³¹ It is the joy of listening for the first time, where one is genuinely surprised as to what will come next.⁴³² It is listening in the present moment and allowing oneself to be grasped. No one comes into a conversation with the expectation of how it will go or conclude. The encounter of conversation remains a mystery right up until its conclusion.

Ritual action is a conversation with mystery. It does not matter if one already knows the moves, liturgy, symbols, dress, and so on. Genuine conversation is remaining

⁴³⁰ See when Rorty says, “We must be hermeneutical where we do not understand what is happening but are honest enough to admit it, rather than being *blatantly* ‘Whiggish’ about it. Rorty, *Philosophy*, 321. One could easily exchange hermeneutics for deconstruction in this sentence.

⁴³¹ Scharen and Vigen clarify that by “de-centering, we mean that while it is impossible (and not desirable) to cast off completely our own views and values as researchers and as people of faith, it is both possible and helpful to put them off to the side in order to focus on the stories, perspectives, and lived realities of others – who may or may not share the lenses we bring.” Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, eds. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen (Continuum: London, 2011), 16.

⁴³² This is not a stripping away of prejudices as Gadamer famously describes, everyone has various prejudices and biases that need to be recognized before interpretation can begin. The greatest challenge, however, is not recognition but encounter. Prejudice should not be seen as a limit, but a gateway into the heart of the other. Prejudice lives in the realm of abnormal discourse. Prejudices are messy and do not fit neatly into so called “normal discourse.”

honest that one has no idea what will happen in the moment.⁴³³ It relaxes the expected so that the unexpected can occur. Such relaxation of expectations can only occur in a weak position. A strong position sets out to define and control. A weak position accepts conversation for what it is. Weakness accepts that conversation will not necessarily be clear and precise. Sometimes it will be no more than a whisper.⁴³⁴ Ritual action will likely be incommensurable, and this is perfectly acceptable.⁴³⁵ The powerful assumption that the incommensurable ought to conform to something is not only unhelpful, but dangerous.⁴³⁶ It stifles the event and makes ritual action predictable and boring.

This is why deconstruction is important and necessary. It takes knowing out of the hands of the experts and returns it to the people. Deconstruction corrects the injustice of telling others what ritual action means. It challenges the powerful positions, age-old traditions, and unquestioned assumptions as to what ritual action is supposed to mean. Deconstruction is not about knowing.⁴³⁷ It is about embracing *not-knowing*. It finds joy in the continual conversation of discovery. Its position is one of weakness rather than

⁴³³ “Whenever it is suggested that the distinctions between theory and practice, fact and value, method and conversation be relaxed, an attempt to make the world ‘malleable to human will’ is suspected.” Rorty, *Philosophy*, 342. Deconstruction answers this critique with an unapologetic “yes!” Deconstruction is about prioritizing human encounter over supposed epistemological foundations.

⁴³⁴ The writer of Ecclesiastes writes, “The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools.” *Harper Collins Study Bible*, Eccl. 9:17.

⁴³⁵ Incommensurable discourse should “not cause despair. For example Rorty explains that “[t]here is no metaphysical reason why human beings should be capable of saying incommensurable things, nor any guarantee that they will continue to do so. It is just our good fortune (from a hermeneutical point of view) or bad fortune (from an epistemological point of view) that they have done so in the past.” Rorty, *Philosophy*, 347.

⁴³⁶ Writing of a unified language, Rorty remarks that “epistemology – as the attempt to render all discourses commensurable by translating them into a preferred set of terms - is unlikely to be a useful strategy. The reason is not that ‘unified science’ works only for one metaphysical realm and not for another, but that the Whiggish assumption that we have got such a language blacks the road of inquiry.” Rorty, *Philosophy*, 349.

⁴³⁷ For example, Rorty makes this same case for hermeneutics. He writes that [h]ermeneutics is not ‘another way of knowing’ – ‘understanding’ as opposed to (predictive) ‘explanation.’ It is better seen as another way of coping.” Rorty, *Philosophy*, 356. An argument could be made that deconstruction would fit better here. Deconstruction can be seen as a way of coping or dealing with what is at hand.

strength. If it is banished to the peripheral, then so be it.⁴³⁸ Deconstruction accepts that position. It accepts the risk.⁴³⁹ It will grasp that burden.⁴⁴⁰ Deconstruction is not about to win a popularity contests. As the Teacher says, “Vanity of vanities says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”⁴⁴¹

All this follows from a deconstructionist point of view. It embraces weakness, and remains satisfied with being obscure and difficult. Deconstruction is never about building great systems of thought. It is an edifying philosophy.⁴⁴² Closely tied to present situations and circumstances. Deconstruction is not concerned with setting itself up for eternity. It will let any system collapse, including its very self, for the sake of the other. It lets go so the other has a space to be heard. Deconstruction, therefore, can never be eternal. There will always be a new situation, action, or generation that need to be heard. Rorty describes the difference between systematic and edifying philosophy as follows:

Great systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments. Great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms. They know their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over.

⁴³⁸ Rorty comprises a list of peripheral philosophers. He writes that “[o]n the periphery of the history of modern philosophy, one finds figures who, without forming a ‘tradition,’ resemble each other in their distrust of the notion that [humanity’s] essence is to be a knower of essences. Goethe, Kierkegaard, Santayana, William James, Dewey, the later Wittgenstein, the later Heidegger, are figures of this sort.” Rorty, *Philosophy*, 367. One can also add Derrida to this list.

⁴³⁹ Tillich knew very well the risk theologians must take. He writes that the theologian “cannot affirm any tradition and any authority except ‘through a ‘No’ and a ‘Yes.’ And it is always possible that he [or she] may not be able to go all the way from the ‘No’ to the ‘Yes.’ He [or she] cannot join the chorus of those who live in unbroken assertions. He [or she] must take the risk of being driven beyond the boundary line of the theological circle. Therefore, the pious and powerful in the church are suspicious of him [or her], although they live in dependence upon the work of the former theologians who were in the same situation.” *Systematic Theology*: Volume I, 25-26.

⁴⁴⁰ The writer of Ecclesiastes writes that “in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.” *Harper Collins Study Bible*, Eccl. 1:18.

⁴⁴¹ *Harper Collins Study Bible*, Eccl. 1:2.

⁴⁴² In describing edifying thinkers Rorty declares, “These peripheral, pragmatic philosophers are skeptical primarily *about systematic philosophy*, about the whole project of universal commensuration.” Rorty, *Philosophy*, 368.

They are *intentionally* peripheral. Great systematic philosophers, like great scientists, build for eternity. Great edifying philosophers destroy for the sake of their own generation. Systematic philosophers want to put their subject on the secure path of a science. Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause – wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is *not* an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described.⁴⁴³

Perhaps there is a world outside deconstruction's current focus, but it can never replace what is happening *now*. It will never be as interesting as what deconstruction encounters every day. Listening to people will forever be its call. Thankfully, deconstruction is uniquely qualified for this task. Its emphasis on undecidability gives it a unique perspective on ritual action.⁴⁴⁴ Undecidability means that the conversation never ends. There is always more to be learned from the other. Ritual action can never be “figured out.” It is a mystery that draws one back again and again. Deconstruction promises that it will never solve, quantify, systematize, or solidify ritual action (as if it could do that anyway). This is the position of humility. Approaching ritual action from humility will go a long way towards connecting with ritual action. It is time for scholarship to embrace weakness. It is time to stop talking and start listening.

Listening to the Rhythms: Preparing for the Conversation

⁴⁴³ Rorty, *Philosophy*, 369-370.

⁴⁴⁴ Caputo writes, “Deconstruction is a quasi-theory of undecidability, and it works well for everything from architecture to literary criticism, from religion to politics. Deconstruction is an exploration of as many ‘instants’ of undecidability as it has time (as it is given time) to study.” Caputo, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 225

A conversation is a wondrous thing. It represents the joy of connecting with the life of another. Though this simple act, conversation brings together human experience. It represents a unique intimacy in the life of another. This level of intimacy is not something achieved. One cannot make conversation happen. A more helpful analogy is to say that one "falls" into conversation. No one really remembers how a conversation started. One may be able to remember some of the first words or even the first question, but this is not when conversation started. One cannot pinpoint the moment simple words become connection. The moment is a blur, and only after reflection does one realize what has just occurred. One has crossed some previously unknown border between connection and solitude. In this crossing one can almost feel the vibration of the other. One has begun to hear the other. The self has just experienced the rhythm of another. Listening has begun.

Once one has learned to listen, what one hears might be shocking. Once one lets go of the noise, a new world of sound begins to unfold. This sound consists of the rhythms of everyday life and experience. It is pure, unfiltered rhythm. It is what one feels when he or she lets go of the expected. It is not a scholarly, philosophical, or theological rhythm. It is the rhythm of life. This rhythm is what one feels the moment one leaves the house, walks through the city, or enters a worship service. Every experience of rhythm holds the potential of conversation.

Here starts a journey towards conversation. This conversation with the unexpected and unknown has no explicit purpose or goal. The only requirement is to give into the conversation. To give in, one allows the rhythms of conversation to overtake the self.

Rhythms

Rhythms prepare one for conversing with ritual action, though there are no rules for how it should be done. There are no predetermined parameters of where, when, or how a conversation is required to occur. In the midst of genuine conversation, there is no fear of the other suddenly saying "stop, you are doing it wrong!" There are, however, certain helpful ways of attuning oneself to listening and conversing. This can be especially useful for listening to ritual action. This preparation does not require one to do anything. One does not need any special training in order to listen to the movements of everyday life. Special training in semiotics or metaphysics is neither desired nor required. Listening to ritual action only requires the self.

Henri Lefebvre describes this listening as rhythmanalysis. Rhythmanalysis is a non-reductive mode of listening to everyday life and experience, including ritual action. It implies that "[e]verywhere where this is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm."⁴⁴⁵ Rhythm occurs through both the linear and cyclical, along with difference and repetition. Everyday life consists of both cyclical and linear patterns that continually exert themselves. There is a natural repetitive essence to both nature and human activity. Cyclical cycles consist of cosmic motions such as changing seasons, day and night cycles, ocean and sea tides, and so on.⁴⁴⁶ Linear cycles come from human action and behavior. The linear is essentially social.⁴⁴⁷ These linear cycles have a definite beginning and end while cosmic cycles appear eternal and

⁴⁴⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 25.

⁴⁴⁶ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 18.

⁴⁴⁷ Lefebvre explains that linear cycles "would come rather from social practice, therefore from human activity: the monotony of actions and of movements, imposed structures," Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 18.

consistent.⁴⁴⁸ Cosmic cycles comprise the background of all human activity and behavior. Because they are cosmic, human behavior cannot escape their impact. Cyclical and linear cycles interact with one another. The cyclical and linear measure against each other. Therefore, Lefebvre maintains, "everything is cyclical repetition through linear repetitions."⁴⁴⁹ Rhythm occurs as these two poles interact with one another.

Rhythm is both measurable and immeasurable. It serves as a bridge between both the quantitative and the qualitative.⁴⁵⁰ The natural and the social are irrevocably intertwined with one another. Human beings act within the natural cycles of life. Since the beginning of time, cosmic cycles has regulated how human beings behave and react. Cosmic cycles represents the ordered and rational cycle of movement and time. Yet within this rational and quantifiable universe are irrational and contradictory linear cycles of human action. Cyclical and linear time struggle with each other.⁴⁵¹

Rhythm establishes itself through repetition and difference. Undifferentiated time, such as the mechanical tick-tock of a clock, is not rhythmic.⁴⁵² Rhythm is the diversity of actions occurring through cyclical and linear cycles. It is both logical and illogical.⁴⁵³

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⁴⁴⁹ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 18.

⁴⁵⁰ Lefebvre writes, "Rhythm reunites quantitative aspects and elements, which mark time and distinguish moments in it - and qualitative aspects and elements...Rhythm appears as regulated time, governed by rational laws, but in contact with what is least rational in human being: the lived, the carnal, the body." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 18.

⁴⁵¹ The cyclical and linear, Lefebvre explains, "penetrate one another, but in an interminable struggle: sometimes compromise, sometimes disruption. However, there is between them an indissoluble unity: the repetitive tick-tock of the clock measures the cycle of hours and days, and vice versa. In industrial practice, where the linear repetitive tends to predominate, the struggle is intense." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 85.

⁴⁵² For example Lefebvre writes that "[f]or there to be rhythm, there must be repetition in a movement, but not just any repetition. The monotonous return of the same, self-identical, noise no more forms a rhythm than does some moving object on its trajectory." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 86.

⁴⁵³ See for example Lefebvre's explanation that "rhythms escape logic, and nevertheless contain a logic, a possible calculus of numbers and numerical relations." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 20.

Repetition may be orderly, but there is no guarantee that it will remain so. There is always room for variation and change.⁴⁵⁴ It has a particular ebb and flow that is neither mechanical nor predictable. Mechanical repetition erases itself. A machine will perform the same task, the same way, over and over until it breaks down. Any variation is a sign the machine is in need of repair. Each moment is repeated over and over.⁴⁵⁵ Nothing is carried over from past experiences. Once a machine performs its task, everything that preceded is erased. Mechanical time has no past and no future. It will never perform its task any differently. The mechanical has repetition but no rhythm. Rhythm is intimately connected to organic life. Lefebvre writes that "rhythm enters into the lived."⁴⁵⁶ Rhythm is the intersection between place, time, and energy.⁴⁵⁷ Rhythm is a process of becoming.⁴⁵⁸ No moment or activity is defined or set in stone. The day grows into itself instead of a predetermined mold. There are no guarantees that events always occur the same way. Rhythm suggests that experience implies memory, growth, and difference. Mundane repetitive tasks may fill the everyday experience. However, within the everyday lies the possibility of the unexpected. Each day and every moment brings with it the hope of difference and the not yet. There is an embedded promise in each day that the future is not set. Each day one may walk out the door, towards the same job, following the same route, and conclude the day by returning home in much the same

⁴⁵⁴ According to Lefebvre there should be "strong times and weak times, which return in accordance with a rule or law - long and short times, recurring in a recognisable way, stops, silences, blanks, resumptions and intervals in accordance with regularity, must appear in a movement. Rhythm therefore brings with it a differentiated time, a qualified duration." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 86.

⁴⁵⁵ "Mechanical repetition works by reproducing the instant that precedes it." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 87.

⁴⁵⁶ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 86.

⁴⁵⁷ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 25.

⁴⁵⁸ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 87.

way. There are no guarantees that the next day will be like the last. One may walk out that same door only to discover a new route, make a life changing decision, have a profound idea, or even fall in love. Rhythms presuppose variation and difference.

Rhythms never remain the same.⁴⁵⁹

Rhythm and the Body

The human body is the starting point for rhythmic listening. The body is not just a subject, it is "the first point of analysis, the tool for subsequent investigations. The body serves us as a metronome."⁴⁶⁰ The body is rhythmic consisting of various beats, thumps, and frequencies working together.⁴⁶¹ In combination with its social setting, the body is never silent. The body calls so that someone somewhere might listen.⁴⁶² In order to listen one cannot ignore the body. One has to be in tune with one's own body in order to connect with surrounding rhythms. Escape from the body, either into the mind or some metaphysical plane, keeps one from listening. It dulls the senses to one's surroundings. Without the body, one cannot hear the rhythms of others.⁴⁶³

⁴⁵⁹ Rhythms are much like the waves of the sea. At first glance it appears that with each wave the same thing is occurring over and over again. The sea appears to be repetitive and monotonous. If one looks closely enough one will notice the subtle variations between each wave. Some are large and small, other crash furiously against the shore while other gently touch the sand. Actions may appear to be the same, but there are subtle variations occurring each time they are performed. Lefebvre explains that to understand rhythm one ought to look to the sea. He writes that "[e]ach sea has its rhythm: that of the Mediterranean is not that of the oceans...It changes ceaselessly. As it approaches the shore, it takes the shock of the backwash: it carries numerous wavelets, right down to the tiny quivers that it orientates but which do not always go in its direction." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 88.

⁴⁶⁰ Stuart Elden, introduction to *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, by Henri Lefebvre (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 6.

⁴⁶¹ "The body consists of a bundle of rhythms, different but in tune." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 30.

⁴⁶² Lefebvre believes that philosophy has not ignored the body. He writes, "The body. Our body. So neglected in philosophy that it ends up speaking its mind and kicking up a fuss. Left to physiology and medicine..." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 30.

⁴⁶³ See for example when Lefebvre writes that "the surrounding of bodies, be they in nature or a social setting, are also *bundles, bouquets, garlands* of rhythms, to which it is necessary to listen in order to grasp the natural or produced ensembles." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 30.

The body helps one connect with the rhythms of one's environment. The rhythms of everyday life are always moving and changing. Rhythms, both natural and social, continually vibrate and interact with one another. The wind and the rain, the gentle rustling of tree leaves, running water, and many others create a symphony of natural rhythms.⁴⁶⁴ The earth is continually moving, vibrating, and shifting. Everything, including smells,⁴⁶⁵ are not neglected when listening to one's environment. In addition to nature, there are the noises, movements, and murmuring of contemporary society. A city street consists of a plethora of rhythms calling out to the listener.⁴⁶⁶ People shuffling, cars and buses, echoes off the pavement, construction, and so on bombard one with movement, sound, smells, and sight. The rhythms of the natural and the social, cyclical and linear, lead one into an immersive experience. One needs to be grasped in order to enter into this experience, listen to the rhythms, and enter its conversation. Lefebvre explains that "to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been grasped by it; one must let oneself go, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration."⁴⁶⁷ One immerses oneself, one's body into the heart of the everyday.⁴⁶⁸ Immersion into the everyday transforms ritual action and people into presences as opposed to things. It helps one to approach the other as a living whole and less like an object to be studied. Ritual action is a living

⁴⁶⁴ According to Lefebvre, for the one that listens "nothing is immobile. He [or she] hears the wind, the rain, storms; but if he [or she] considers a stone, a wall, a trunk, he [or she] understands their slowness, their interminable rhythm. This *object* is not inert; time is not set aside for the subject. It is only slow in relation to our time, to our body, the measure of rhythms." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 30.

⁴⁶⁵ For example, Lefebvre writes that "smells are a part of rhythms, reveal them: odours of the morning and evening, of hours of sunlight or darkness, of rain or fine weather." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 31.

⁴⁶⁶ The rhythms of society are immersive. Lefebvre explains that "[one] who walks down the street...is immersed in the multiplicity of noises, murmurs, rhythms." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 38.

⁴⁶⁷ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 37.

⁴⁶⁸ Lefebvre writes, "He garbs himself in this tissue of the lived, of the everyday." Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 31.

presence. It lives in the moments of life and it therefore full of meaning. One listens for organic rhythm. Ritual action is a living and changing movement comprised of living and changing people. Everything about ritual action is alive. Its rhythm is more akin to a heartbeat rather than a mechanical clock. Understanding that ritual action has a rhythm will enable one to form a relationship with the story of both ritual action and its participants.⁴⁶⁹ It is necessary that one immerse oneself into the conversation.

Conversation with Foot Washing

It is time to enter the conversation and listen. Now is the moment of practice. Doing so requires humility to enter into a new world of possibility and experience dictated by the other, waiting and wanting to be heard. Finding a conversation partner is not the difficult part. Once one is open to conversation, the world is opened up in ways never before imagined. One might find oneself involved in a centuries-old dialogue with the dead. Perhaps the conversation is brand new, and dialogue partners are still emerging. One only needs to listen.

In ritual action, conversation partners are seemingly endless. Within Christianity alone, the diversity of practices, movements, and images abounds. They all have a story to tell. These are not stories of theological jargon, but of real people and their experiences, ones commonly met with theological and philosophical silence. When these stories are told and truly heard, theology can then take on a role as a midwife instead of

⁴⁶⁹ Lefebvre explains that “rhythmanalysis transforms *everything* into presences, including the present, grasped and perceived as such. The act does not imprison itself in the ideology of the *thing*. It perceives the *thing* in the proximity of the *present*...the act of rhythmanalysis integrates these things – this wall, this table, these trees – in a dramatic becoming, in an ensemble full of meaning, transforming them no longer into diverse things, but into presences.” Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 33.

divine creator. Once theology listens to ritual action, it will realize that theology is already there. Theology does not need to create it.⁴⁷⁰

Engaging the ritual action of foot washing in conversation serves as an example of what is possible when one listens to ritual action. In this conversation, foot washing is the voice of weakness. The conversation shows thus what can be learned from weakness. Its voice is not of power or strength. It lacks the glamor of other Christian ritual actions such as communion and baptism. Feet are ordinary, associated with smell, kept out of sight even more in contemporary culture than that of first century Palestine.

As a ritual action based on weakness, it is an excellent conversational partner with deconstruction. It shows what can be learned from ritual action, especially what ritual action uniquely situated in weakness teaches one about the virtues. Further, this conversation is not generic. This is not just about any group. This is foot washing as practiced by the congregations of Original Free Will Baptist denomination. Being a small voice, the Original Free Will Baptists provide a small, weak way of entering the conversation. So this conversation is for the sake of conversation. The only goal is conversation itself. It is now time to step aside and let this ritual action speak for itself. It is time to listen to the Original Free Will Baptist practice of foot washing.

⁴⁷⁰ See for example Scharen and Vigen's explanation that "we understand ethnography as a process of attentive study of, and learning from, people - their words, practices, traditions, experiences, memories, insights - in particular times and places in order to understand how they make meaning (cultural, religious, ethical) and what they can teach us about reality, truth, beauty, moral responsibility, relationships and the divine, etc." Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, 16.

Chapter Four: Conversing with Ritual Action: A Conversation with Original Free

Will Baptists

*I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.
I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true;
It satisfies my longings, as nothing else would do.
I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.⁴⁷¹*

Introducing the Conversation

The Original Free Will Baptists⁴⁷² are a guide for encountering ritual action. Ritual action is explored through OFWB lens experiences and stories of foot washing. The OFWB provides an opportunity to explore how ritual action shapes the OFWB practitioners. Foot washing⁴⁷³ is a gateway for interpreting ritual action. Foot washing brings to light the fundamental weakness of interpretations that treat action as arbitrary and secondary. Exploring foot washing is an effort at taking ritual seriously. It works towards understanding how action holds meaning, and demonstrating that action is critical for theological reflection.

Foot washing is a simple practice for OFWBs. It comprises simple movements and simple things. At first glance, it appears that there is little to say about it. Foot washing is not glamorous or awe inspiring. It lacks colorful vestments, powerful words,

⁴⁷¹ Katerine A. Hankey, "I Love to Tell the Story," in *The Celebration Hymnal: Songs and Hymns for Worship*, ed. Tom Fettke (Nashville: Word Music, 1997), #444.

⁴⁷² In what follows, "OFWB" will be used for Original Free Will Baptist.

⁴⁷³ Other names include: "washing feet," "washing of the disciples' feet," and "feet washing." For simplicity, the term "foot washing" will be used whenever possible.

and careful choreography. Yet within these actions and objects lies a beautiful and rich story. This is a story hidden and unknown by many. The OFWB foot washing story is one patiently waiting to be told. It is a story of humbleness, equality, and dignity.

Gathering the Narrative

The OFWB has little written theology on foot washing, however there is an abundant unwritten tradition and theology. Therefore focus was given to the stories and experience of pastors and laypersons. These experiences ranged from the personal testimonies and history to participant observation. Foot washing is fundamentally a ritual action made possible by its participants. This research focuses on OFWB foot washing participants.

Multiple approaches were used to listen to the OFWB foot washing story. Listening to the OFWB experience of foot washing involved self-administered questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. These approaches compiled a narrative of the OFWB foot washing experience. Ethnography was used as a guide in order to build the OFWB narrative.⁴⁷⁴ This narrative was created by the participants rather than the researcher. These approaches brought together the OFWB voices and the researcher. The OFWB and the researcher became co-collaborators and co-authors in the narrative.⁴⁷⁵ Ethnographic approaches made it possible to “get a deep reading of what is there – on its own terms.”⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁴ This use of ethnography shares Scharen and Vigen’s conviction that the “aim is to understand what God, human relationships, and the world look like from their perspective – to take them seriously as a source of wisdom.” Christian Scharen and Anna Marie Vigen, “What is Ethnography?” in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, eds. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen (New York: Continuum, 2011), 16.

⁴⁷⁵ Scharen and Vigen, “What is Ethnography?,” 19, 22.

⁴⁷⁶ Scharen and Vigen, “What is Ethnography?,” 27.

Questionnaires

Gathering the narrative began with the construction and distribution of a self-administered questionnaire.⁴⁷⁷ This self-administered questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions designed to enter into the lives and experiences of OFWB participants of foot washing. These open-ended questions delivered “insights into the minds, beliefs and opinions of individual respondents in a way that closed questions cannot.”⁴⁷⁸ The self-administered questionnaire consisted of non-random questionnaires based on convenience. The questionnaire invited members and pastors to complete three multiple choice and four open-ended questions. The multiple choice questions gathered simple information on how and when foot washing was practiced in the respondent’s church. The purpose of the multiple choice questions were to help stimulate the written responses. The following four questions consisted of open-ended reflection questions on the practice of foot washing.

The questionnaires were distributed via mail and email across the OFWB denomination. The first were mailed to churches. Out of the 240 OFWB churches, fifty were chosen to receive questionnaires. The fifty were as a theoretically representative sample of OFWB congregations. Each church received a packet containing twenty-five questionnaires, a letter of introduction and instructions, a sign-up sheet for interviews/focus groups, and a postage-paid return envelope. The second was distributed digitally through the OFWB email mailing list. Participants were invited to complete the

⁴⁷⁷ Juhem Navarro-Rivera and Barry A. Kosmin define a questionnaire as “the main element of a survey and consists of question or batteries of questions that the research(s) want the sample to answer in order to learn about the characteristics, behavior and beliefs of the target universe,” Juhem Navarro-Rivera and Barry A. Kosmin, “Surveys and Questionnaires” in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, eds. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (New York: Routledge, 2011), 395.

⁴⁷⁸ Navarro-Rivera and Kosmin, “Surveys and Questionnaires,” 409-410.

questionnaire using Google survey.⁴⁷⁹ Out of the fifty questionnaires packets mailed, thirteen were returned totaling 109 returned questionnaires. Thirty-eight responded to the online version of the questionnaire.

Interviews

Telephone interviews followed self-administered questionnaires. Eight laypersons and eleven ministers volunteered for one-on-one telephone interviews. All interviews were audio recorded. Participants indicated their willingness to volunteer on the questionnaire. Due to the small population and regional size of the OFWB denomination, nineteen interviews were determined to be sufficient. Several studies have demonstrated that when studying homogenous groups, theoretical saturation tends to be met after twelve interviews.⁴⁸⁰

Following individual interviews, focus groups were conducted in order to gain perspectives from individuals in conversation and group exchange.⁴⁸¹ Two focus groups were conducted. The first focus group consisted of ministers and the second was made up of laypeople. The first focus group consisted of five participants. The second group included nine participants. Both focus groups were conducted in person and recorded with an audio and digital video recorder. All interviews followed an in-depth, semi-

⁴⁷⁹ A copy of this online questionnaire can be found here:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/12CfscZTqQnD0Ze38oejqICeN--VP8DVZGeJo4Wi8yTc/viewform>.

⁴⁸⁰ Bremborg lists several studies on theoretical saturation. See Bremborg, "Interviewing" in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, eds. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (New York: Routledge, 2011), 314. Studies have shown that when research does not involve a comparison of variables or sampling groups, twelve interviews are sufficient. A large scale project may involve more interviews, but because of the small area of this study (primarily Eastern North Carolina) this is all the less necessary.

⁴⁸¹ As Bremborg puts it, "The participants in the focus group can be both stimulated and challenged by other people's stories. Focus groups can be a good alternative to one-to-one interviews, for example if the respondents lack experience in talking about the topic and would be helped by input from others, or if the topic is hard to talk about due to external circumstances." Bremborg, "Interviewing," 313.

structured interview protocol. Interviews focused on how participants understand the ritual action of foot washing. Participants were encouraged to share stories and experiences of foot washing. Focus was given to OFWB feelings and attitudes toward their experiences of foot washing. Interviews included questions on meaning and how foot washing forms identity and community.⁴⁸²

Participant Observation

The final stage was participant observation by the research, who both participated in and observed an experience of foot washing. The researcher compiled in-depth notes and the entire experience is also video recorded. The observed congregation was chosen based on availability and interest.

Foot Washing Through History

Foot washing does not belong exclusively to the OFWB. Foot washing appears in some form throughout Christian history. Before its initiation by Christ, foot washing was a practice of hospitality. The earliest biblical examples of foot washing are found in Genesis. Abraham offers water to three visitors so their feet may be washed.⁴⁸³ Lot offers the angels of the Lord an opportunity to wash their feet and spend the night.⁴⁸⁴ Other

⁴⁸² Interview protocols are located in the appendixes.

⁴⁸³ “He said, ‘My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.’” *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), Gen. 18:3-4.

⁴⁸⁴ “He said, ‘Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.’” *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Gen. 19:2.

mentions include Genesis 43:24, Judges 19:21, and 1 Samuel 25:41. The book of Exodus links it to a religious ceremony in 30:19⁴⁸⁵ and 40:30-32.⁴⁸⁶

Foot washing was widely practiced in the Greco-Roman world.⁴⁸⁷ It was an act of hospitality and courtesy for guests. Open sandals on dusty and dry roads made this practice a necessity for guests. It was generally expected that a host would make arrangements for guests to have their feet washed.⁴⁸⁸ Jesus gives the act particular significance in John 13:1-17. In the upper room, Jesus serves the disciples by washing their feet, thus reversing the roles of master and servant.⁴⁸⁹ Jesus' actions are interpreted by most as an act of humility in contrast to the disciples' hubris.⁴⁹⁰ The early church continued this practice of foot washing.⁴⁹¹ There is evidence that church fathers practiced it, including Tertullian, Origen, Chrysostom, and Augustine.⁴⁹² In 694 CE, the Catholic

⁴⁸⁵ "You shall make a bronze basin with a bronze stand for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar and you shall put water in it; with the water Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet." *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Ex. 30:18-19.

⁴⁸⁶ "He set the basin between the tent of meeting and the altar, and put water in it for washing, with which Moses and Aaron and his sons washed their hands and their feet. When they went into the tent of meeting, and when they approached the altar, they washed; as the Lord had commanded Moses." *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Ex. 40:30-32.

⁴⁸⁷ Richard E. Allison writes, "In the Greco-Roman world, foot washing was done for several reasons: (1) as a ritual; (2) domestically, for reasons of personal comfort and hygiene; (3) as an expression of hospitality, a gesture of greeting, or in preparation for a banquet; and (4) as a service by servants or slaves." Richard E. Allison, "Foot Washing," *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, eds. Erwin Fahlbusch et al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 322.

⁴⁸⁸ For example in Luke the text reads, "Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.'" *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Luke 7:44-46.

⁴⁸⁹ Allison, 322.

⁴⁹⁰ H.A. Kent, Jr. writes, "Jesus' washing of feet is usually explained as teaching the need for humility in the light of the disciples' obvious lack of self-abasement in the upper room (Luke 22:24-30). H.A. Kent, Jr., "Foot Washing," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1997), 419.

⁴⁹¹ There is evidence in 1 Timothy that foot washing was a practice of the early church. Describing widows, the text reads, "She must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way." *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, 1 Tim 5:10.

⁴⁹² Allison, 322.

Church adopted washing of the feet, or *pedilavium*, as a Holy Thursday liturgical rite at the 17th Synod of Toledo in Spain.⁴⁹³

Today, several groups of Christians trace their history to the radical reformation practice of foot washing as an ordinance, meaning the practice is understood to be established by Christ. This includes Brethren and Mennonite groups as well as some Baptists.⁴⁹⁴ Roman Catholics and Anglicans conduct foot washing as part of Holy Thursday liturgy.⁴⁹⁵ Recently, Pope Francis has brought renewed attention to foot washing.⁴⁹⁶

Introducing the Original Free Will Baptist Community

The OFWB are small in number, with fewer than 40,000 adherents,⁴⁹⁷ but they have a long history. The OFWB community traces its history to the English General Baptists, who as early as 1700 were worshiping in North Carolina.⁴⁹⁸ The OFWB community is proud of its General Baptist heritage. The denomination's own articles of faith originate from the *1660 English General Baptist Confession of Faith*⁴⁹⁹ and the

⁴⁹³ J.A. Fischer, "Washing of the Feet," *New Catholic Encyclopedia: Vol. 14*, ed. W.J. O'Shea (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 653.

⁴⁹⁴ Kent, 419.

⁴⁹⁵ Allison, 322.

⁴⁹⁶ Nichole Winfield, "Holy Thursday: Pope Washes the Feet of 12 Inmates, 1 Infant," *Huffington Post*, April 2, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/02/pope-francis-holy-thursday_n_6993974.html.

⁴⁹⁷ "Original Free Will Baptist – Number of Adherents (2010)," *The Association of Religion Data Archives*, accessed June 29, 2016, http://www.thearda.com/ql2010/QL_S_2010_2_1047c.asp.
<http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/maps/map.asp?state=101&variable=332>.

⁴⁹⁸ North Carolina State Convention of Original Free Will Baptists, *The Articles of Faith and Principles of Church Government for Original Free Will Baptists (Of the English General Baptist Heritage)* (Ayden, NC: Free Will Baptist Press, 2001), xxvii.

⁴⁹⁹ J. Matthew Pinson, *A Free Will Baptist Handbook : Heritage, Beliefs, and Ministries* (Nashville: Randall House Publications, 1998), 5.

1812 revision.⁵⁰⁰ The community traces its history to Paul Palmer, who established and pastored the first General Baptist church in Chowan County, North Carolina.⁵⁰¹

Today, the home of OFWBs remains North Carolina. Two-hundred and forty OFWB churches stretch across Eastern and Central North Carolina, including a small number in South Carolina and Georgia.⁵⁰² These churches are organized into eight different geographically based conferences. These conferences coordinate and regulate the work of the denomination, as well as examining and ordaining ministerial candidates.⁵⁰³ Despite its small size, the OFWB has several ministries. These ministries include foreign missions, a children's home, printing press, and university.⁵⁰⁴

Throughout its history, the denomination has gone through several cycles of growth and decline.⁵⁰⁵ The denomination survived early competition from the Particular Baptists⁵⁰⁶, the Campbellite Crisis, and a denominational split with the National Association of Free Will Baptists.⁵⁰⁷ Despite difficult circumstances, the denomination sees itself as having remained true to the "spirit and simplicity of the Palmer General Baptist background."⁵⁰⁸ This includes the practice of foot washing, more formally called the "washing of the saints' feet."⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁰ Michael R. Pelt, *A History of Original Free Will Baptist* (Mount Olive, NC: Mount Olive College Press, 1996), 104.

⁵⁰¹ H. Leon McBeth, *Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 712.

⁵⁰² "Directory of Churches," *The Convention of Original Free Will Baptist Churches*, accessed January 19, 2014, https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0Bxp_-UPwdYDFaGR2RINScHM5bFE&usp=sharing.

⁵⁰³ Original Free Will Baptists, *The Articles of Faith*, 103-104.

⁵⁰⁴ "Ministries of the Original Free Will Baptist," *The Convention of Original Free Will Baptist Churches*, accessed May 8, 2014, <http://www.ofwb.org/#!amenities/cee5>.

⁵⁰⁵ Original Free Will Baptists, *The Articles of Faith*, xxix-xxxvii.

⁵⁰⁶ Particular Baptists referred to General Baptists as "Free-Willers." *The Articles of Faith*, xxxii.

⁵⁰⁷ Floyd B. Cherry, *An Introduction to Original Free Will Baptist* (Ayden, NC: Free Will Baptist Press, 1989), 25-35; 47-51.

⁵⁰⁸ McBeth, *Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*, 716.

⁵⁰⁹ Original Free Will Baptists, *The Articles of Faith*, 52.

History of Foot Washing Among Original Free Will Baptists

OFWBs have consistently practiced foot washing throughout its history.

Beginning with its General Baptist heritage, the practice of washing feet was conducted almost universally. Although not required for church membership, most considered it an ordinance.⁵¹⁰ Foot washing remained a prominent practice among early Free Will Baptists throughout the 1700s. At the adoption of its 1812 confession, instructions were included recommending that foot washing be practiced every quarter.⁵¹¹ This 1812 confession was the first Arminian Baptist confession to formally describe foot washing as an ordinance.⁵¹²

In the denomination's history, several prominent pastors have reaffirmed the OFWB commitment to foot washing. In 1927, J. C. Griffin argued in his booklet, *The Upper Room Ought*, that it is not enough to know that Christ washed the disciple's feet; rather, Christians ought to do it.⁵¹³ Free Will Baptist historian George Stevenson describes foot washing as a way to open one to humility and love, which "serves to strengthen in us a bond of fellowship and brotherhood, to confirm the strength of our faith, and to reveal our weaknesses to us."⁵¹⁴

Today the OFWB consider foot washing to have equal standing with baptism and communion. The OFWB *Articles of Faith* state that it "teaches humility, the necessity of the servanthood of every believer, and reminds the believer of the necessity of a daily cleansing from all sin."⁵¹⁵ Foot washing is not unique to the OFWB, but "it is one of

⁵¹⁰ Pelt, *A History of Original Free Will Baptist*, 18.

⁵¹¹ George Stevenson, "A Humbling Act Commanded by Christ," *The Free Will Baptist* 82, no.31 (1967): 5.

⁵¹² Pinson, *A Free Will Baptist Handbook*, 19.

⁵¹³ J.C. Griffin, *The Upper Room Ought* (Ayden, NC: Free Will Baptist Press, 1927), 29.

⁵¹⁴ Stevenson, "A Humbling Act Commanded by Christ," 5.

⁵¹⁵ Original Free Will Baptists, *The Articles of Faith*, 52.

[their] distinctive beliefs and practices, and it makes a very strong theological statement about the stance of the [OFWB] Church and the attitude for ministry (service) among both clergy and laity.”⁵¹⁶ Foot washing is also incorporated in the OFWB logo. This logo pictures a basin of water and a towel sitting at the foot of the cross.⁵¹⁷

Foot washing is traditionally practiced following communion, whereby members wash one another’s feet. Men and women typically separate to wash one another’s feet.⁵¹⁸ Usually involving only basins of water and girded towels, it is simple in design but powerful in meaning. Thus significance is not found in the things used, but in the actions performed. It is important to note that foot washing typically occurs during Sunday night service, which is also one of the least attended services.⁵¹⁹

The Narrative of Foot Washing Among Original Free Will Baptists

Among the OFWB, foot washing is a simple practice.⁵²⁰ Its movements and gestures do not require any special effort to mimic and learn. The movements and items themselves are not far removed from daily life. They carry with them a certain degree of familiarity.

The items used in OFWB foot washing are, for lack of a better word, common. The plain pails of water and towels do not typically carry any special significance. Simple and unadorned, the pails and towels used in foot washing are not especially

⁵¹⁶ Floyd Cherry, *Original Free Will Baptist Believe: A Study of the Articles of Faith of Original Free Will Baptist*, ed. Floyd Cherry (Pine Level, NC: Carolina Bible Institute & Seminary, 1996), 120.

⁵¹⁷ The logo can be found on <http://www.ofwb.org/>.

⁵¹⁸ It has been the practice of OFWBs to have men wash men’s feet and women wash women’s feet. This is done for modesty purposes. Men and women may go to separate rooms or to private areas in a fellowship hall or a large room.

⁵¹⁹ A pastor says, “Sunday nights we have twenty or twenty-five for regular church Sunday night service. Those are usually the twenty to twenty-five there for washing of the saints’ feet. So it’s a small crowd, but it’s usually the small [crowd] that’s there for Sunday night services too.” Focus group interview with members and pastors, June 28, 2015.

⁵²⁰ Recorded video of OFWB Church foot washing service, June 28 2015.

attractive and without significance in themselves. The pails hold just enough water to immerse one's foot. Towels are equally modest. They are simple, uninteresting items rarely given a second thought in the process. Thin and frayed from age, one simply picks up one of the towels and girds it around the waist. Neither the pails nor the towels are considered blessed or holy. They hold no divinely given powers. They are what they are, and nothing more.

After girding oneself, one waits for the other to remove his or her shoes. While waiting, one kneels down. The other slowly places his or her foot into the pail of water one foot at a time. While kneeling, one takes the other's foot and lightly sprinkles water on it. Cradling the foot in one hand, the runs water across the foot. Delicately running one's fingers through the water, the water slowly drips onto the foot. The water from the hand passes to the foot, connecting participants with the shared water. After drying the other's foot with the girded towel, the process is repeated on the other foot. Once completed, places are exchanged. Each person has the opportunity to give as well as receive. The whole process is quick, lasting only a few minutes.

Once each person has had the opportunity to wash and be washed, the pails and the towels are washed, cleaned, and stored away until needed again. Hugs and words of love are exchanged, prayers given, and the community is brought together. Hymns are sung and words of praise may be given. No prescribed words exist, no written rubric is followed. Instead, the people simply gather together in love and fellowship.

How do OFWBs Explain Foot Washing to Others?

In order to explain foot washing, many pastors and members go directly to the text in scripture (John 13). Understanding begins with the story as presented. Without

hesitation, one pastor declares, “You’ve got to go to the text, and in the context of why Jesus did it. My understanding, because you got to go to Luke, disciples were upset about who was going to be the greatest.”⁵²¹ Within the text, several point to Jesus’s command that the disciples should continue this practice. Since Jesus has “ordained” foot washing, all Christians should practice it. One pastor describes Jesus’ command as the most important part. He says that “[r]arely can I say that I’m doing something that the Lord has asked me to do and he has asked me to do this and it’s a privilege for me to do. It’s something I look forward to when we have it...If I try to describe it to someone who has never done it, I try to tell them I try to be obedient to the scriptures.”⁵²² Other pastors also explain it through Jesus’ example in scripture. A pastor describes that he introduces it through the scriptures and explains why Jesus did it. He does this in order to “give people an understanding of why we do. He [Jesus] has given us a mandate. He didn’t say you ought to, he just said you need to do these things. If I have done yours, you ought to wash the other. I usually introduce it that way.”⁵²³

Members also refer to the scripture when explaining foot washing to others. One longtime member of the OFWB says, “I personally just take God’s word literally. I think that’s one of the things he wanted us to do, and when I get down on my knees to wash somebody’s feet I really appreciate the opportunity to do that for God.”⁵²⁴ Others members also reinforced this same idea. For example, one member says that she “would explain that we do this because Jesus at the last supper, when he had the bread and the

⁵²¹ Focus group (A) interview with OFWB pastor, June 28, 2015.

⁵²² Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁵²³ Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁵²⁴ Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

wine, [Jesus said] ‘do this in remembrance of me,’ but he also said when we wash feet, ‘do this, I wash your feet you should wash one another’s feet.’ So we do that and to literally do that is to humble yourself.”⁵²⁵

Members and pastors have their own ways of explaining and sharing foot washing to those unfamiliar with it. Conversations demonstrate that OFWBs have rich and insightful theological viewpoints on foot washing. Many already have experience in explaining foot washing to other Christians. OFWBs are prepared to teach, explain, and defend their practice of foot washing.

A former member of the OFWB, now living outside of North Carolina, has had to explain it to Christians unfamiliar with foot washing. He has opportunities to talk about foot washing in his Sunday school class. He emphasizes “the humility of doing it as Jesus Christ washed feet, and his sacrifice and his given of us all. It’s personal but it’s not. It’s like the Lord’s Supper, it’s personal but it’s also public in that you are participating with other believers and you are letting others know that you are among the chosen.”⁵²⁶

Another member makes it clear that “[y]ou’re not going to get a bar of soap as some people might would think.”⁵²⁷ He declares, “It is a humbling experience that you would wash someone else’s feet even though you just place it in the water, and rinse it off and dry it with a towel. Its humility, I guess, in one of its greatest forms to me.”⁵²⁸

Pastors have developed their own methods for explaining foot washing to new members in their congregations. For example, one pastor describes that he will “explain

⁵²⁵ Interview with OFWB member (G), January 29, 2015.

⁵²⁶ Interview with OFWB member (C), June 30, 2015. It should be noted that this particular individual is now a member of a Calvinist Baptist denomination. As such, his use of the word ‘chosen’ would not be typical among most OFWBs.

⁵²⁷ Interview with OFWB member (H), January 26, 2015.

⁵²⁸ Interview with OFWB member (H), January 26, 2015.

to [new members] what it is, what it means, what it represents. I first tell them how we do it physically. And then I go into a little more detail in what that represents.”⁵²⁹ Following the basics he goes on to say “I’m going to tell them that it means, that it represents that we are no better than anyone else, but that we are willing to be considered lower than the other to be able to help someone.”⁵³⁰ Sometimes a pastor may wait to share foot washing with those who want to join the church. This pastor explains, “We don’t really advertise it as something to people who are visitors. Usually that’s the kind of thing that kind of causes people to not [join the church].”⁵³¹ He typically waits until they are serious about joining the church before explaining foot washing and other doctrines of the church. He tells prospective members “what it means to wash the saints’ feet. Why we do it, what’s the process. I always tell them it’s not anything rude...Most people have already washed their feet before they come.”⁵³² OFWB pastors are aware and sensitive to the fact that foot washing can make some people uncomfortable. It is something that may take time. Foot washing has to be “voluntary, you know if you choose to do it. Which is really the only way that you can do it. You can’t force anyone to do it by any means. Things of that nature would remove the emphasis off of what it’s supposed to be doing to demand that you got to do it.”⁵³³

Other pastors make sure newcomers are given the opportunity to watch and participate. to Foot washing newcomers are sometimes paired with a leader within the church, usually the pastor or a deacon. This helps to reduce some of the unfamiliarity and

⁵²⁹ Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁵³⁰ Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁵³¹ Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁵³² He goes on to say, “I tell them about the incarnational nature of it. What it means the fact that we’re embodied... We really do believe that Christ cares about the human person as a whole.” Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁵³³ Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

uncomfortableness. No one is ever forced to participate. It is okay to just sit and observe before making the decision to participate or not. Typically, one pastor explains, “If you don’t want to participate, just observe. See what takes place you know. Then I kind of pair them up. If I have new members that have never practiced that, I try to make sure that when they do wash feet that they’re paired with someone who really understands what it’s all about. I think that’s a part of discipleship. With someone that really understands the meaning of washing feet.”⁵³⁴ Observation is important for those who have no prior experience with foot washing. It takes patience and careful explanation in order to make newcomers comfortable. One pastor discovered that “if you would talk to them and tell them exactly what happens they’ll experience one time, and I encourage them just to go back and observe. I find that when you do that, and encourage and love them along, that they really want to participate.”⁵³⁵ This same pastor describes how after observing foot washing, a new member told him, “I was very uncomfortable leaving the sanctuary, going to another room to be with other ladies knowing that I was going to have my feet washed and wash someone else’s feet. I was real uncomfortable but then when we got in there it was really more like a worship service.”⁵³⁶ Even for pastors from other denominations, observation is necessary in order to understand foot washing. OFWB pastors sometimes describe playful joking from other pastors, outside the tradition, about foot washing.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (I), February 2, 2015.

⁵³⁵ Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁵³⁶ Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁵³⁷ A pastor shares, “In one of our pastoral ministry classes at Southeastern seminary, we were supposed to perform something [from a] a pastoral point of view and I did feet washing in one of my seminary classes and they were in shock. They were all Southern Baptist except for me. It was a small group, about 7 of us I think, and I did the feet washing service and their jaws were just dropping and it really surprised them. Because they had kind of joked about it, talked about it, and everything else to me so

When teaching foot washing, pastors try to teach and model the aspects of servanthood and servant leadership to their congregations. Toward newcomers, pastors use foot washing to demonstrate that they are neither above the church nor authoritarian figures. When teaching a class of new members, one pastor says, “I feel like I have an advantage. I get to talk to some of the people I teach in the intro class. We can sit there and tell the stories of the beatitudes and how Jesus is switching everything around we always thought to be normal... At the end of the day all of the talking meant nothing until he got down on knees, girded himself with a towel and started [washing the feet] of his disciples, of his disciples. His disciples! That's what I look at.”⁵³⁸ Speaking of foot washing, he continues, “To me that's very important and [I] think that's what Christ shows, because it easy for us to have all of the sudden an authoritative figure on [the] pulpit.”⁵³⁹ This is why it is not unusual to see an OFWB “pastor washing possibly one of the least fortunate financially members of the church.”⁵⁴⁰

First and Memorable Experiences of Foot Washing

Foot washing is a vitally important aspect of participants’ memories and experiences. Many of these experience began in childhood (twelve and younger). First experiences for children typically invoke feelings of strangeness, even reluctance or uncomfortable feelings.⁵⁴¹ Much of this has to do with the general stigma involving feet.⁵⁴²

when they really saw it done the way the scriptures have it clearly spelled out in John, it suddenly changed their understanding of it. It really did. When they saw it acted out instead of just joking about it, it changed their attitude. It really did.” Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁵³⁸ Focus group (A) interview with OFWB pastor, June 28, 2015.

⁵³⁹ Focus group (A) interview with OFWB pastor, June 28, 2015.

⁵⁴⁰ Interview with OFWB member (H), January 26, 2015.

⁵⁴¹ Focus group (A) interview with OFWB pastor, June 28, 2015.

⁵⁴² Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

OFWB childhood experiences are both strange and fascinating. One's first experience can cause feelings of nervousness and anxiety. One member recalls being nervous the first time "because I didn't know what to do. So I looked and observed. One of the deacons kind of took me under his wing, showed me what [foot washing] was, he washed my feet first. I remember that."⁵⁴³ As a nine year old, one pastor remembers how captivating it was for him to do it for the first time. He said that is "because to a child when you experience that for the first time it's an eye opening experience because it's something you've never pictured yourself doing."⁵⁴⁴

Sometimes children can observe what is happening before actually participating.⁵⁴⁵ Most childhood experiences occur sometime after baptism. For children it is a hard action to understand, but one quickly gets over those feelings.⁵⁴⁶ It becomes second nature even though they may not understand it. As a child, one pastor recalls not understanding foot washing: "It was just that's what you did so you did it. As you grow, become more familiar with the teaching and understand what it is, then it becomes much [clearer.]"⁵⁴⁷ This same pastor further explains, "That the folks then, if I remember correctly, they didn't take much time to explain it either. That's what we did as OFWBs. That's what you did."⁵⁴⁸ Another pastor echoed this same sentiment explaining "I didn't understand it. It was just something that I went over there and did...I didn't really absorb

⁵⁴³ Interview with OFWB member (C), June 30, 2015.

⁵⁴⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (K), February 12, 2015.

⁵⁴⁵ One pastor recalls, "It would not be unusual for me, after communion, to go back there with the men and to observe what was going on. So I've really grown up with it all of my life." Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁵⁴⁶ Foot washing can become a natural action. A questionnaire respondent reports that she has "[b]een doing this [foot washing] my whole life, was strange to learn other churches didn't do it." Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (H), April 2014.

⁵⁴⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁵⁴⁸ Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

it until probably until I was married. In my mid-twenties before it started to mean more to me.”⁵⁴⁹

OFWB pastors and members describe being in awe during foot washing.⁵⁵⁰ Part of it is the feeling of inclusion, especially when most of those doing it are older. A pastor recalls, “One thing that always struck me was that it was all different generations doing it together. That was a time when we could interact with people who weren’t necessarily our own age and so a lot of the older women would wash the female children’s feet and vice versa.”⁵⁵¹ There are feelings of acceptance and inclusion when these OFWBs experience foot washing for the first time. It is an opportunity to learn from the older members of the congregation.⁵⁵²

Participating in foot washing often brings one in contact with the older more prominent members of the congregation. It places one on equal footing with the deacons, Sunday school teachers, and other spiritual leaders in the church. For example, one pastor remembers at “eight or nine years old, I thought I had arrived. This was fantastic, this was something that I’ve not done. And to hear them singing while they were washing feet, the men in the room, it didn’t matter if I was a young boy, I was included with what was going on.”⁵⁵³ It is especially meaningful when a family member washes one’s feet.⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁴⁹ Interview with OFWB member (H), January 26, 2015.

⁵⁵⁰ One pastor remembers that “my first reaction would be like in awe, of grown men washing each other’s feet. And of course not understanding what all that mean and what all it represented.” Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁵⁵¹ Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

⁵⁵² A questionnaire respondent writes that the most important aspect of foot washing was “[b]eing with the elderly people when I was young and learning from them.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (A), May 2014.

⁵⁵³ Interview with OFWB pastor (B), March 26, 2015.

⁵⁵⁴ One pastor remembers his grandfather washing his feet for the very first time. He remembers “growing up in the church after I was saved and baptized going through the ritual of feet washing, even having my grandfather to wash my feet. I can remember that as well. I was twelve or thirteen year old boy.

Washing the feet of one's mother or father can create a moving experience.⁵⁵⁵

Experiences with family members are often remembered later in life.⁵⁵⁶ Even indirect experience involving family members can create powerful memories. As a boy, a pastor remembers his grandfather washing the feet of a mentally handicapped man. This man frequently walked to church. He remembers "his feet looked terrible. His toenails hadn't been cut, and I remember my granddaddy dropping right down on his knees and washing those feet. I was thinking how could you do that? I could never do that. As I have looked back over the years it really made me realize that if you can't wash feet like that, then you can't wash feet. You're missing the whole point."⁵⁵⁷

Remembering her first experiences more than sixty-five years ago, one member shares how she felt excluded as a child. Because she had not accepted Christ and been baptized, she was not allowed to attend.⁵⁵⁸ She remembers "watching the men go to one side and the women the other and not understanding."⁵⁵⁹ When she finally was allowed to participate, she recalls how much of an honor it was to participate with the ladies in her church. These were the women that taught her in Sunday school. They were the ones

That mean a lot to me that my grandfather would do that." Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁵⁵⁵ Describing her first experience of foot washing, a questionnaire respondent writes, "I remember washing my mother's feet, and she washed mine. To be able to do that for my mother was very touching." Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (F), September 2014.

⁵⁵⁶ One pastor recalls an experience with his uncle. He remembers being in a Sunday school classroom at his church when he was ten years old. He shares, "One of my uncles took the lead and would lead the singing when men would go back there for washing of feet and we had several persons at that who were new members. . .one of the respected leaders of the church took on the new candidates and washed their feet and showed them how we practiced that at the [church name] church. Then my uncle would lead the singing. I was ten years old, but I still remember being in that classroom." Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁵⁵⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁵⁵⁸ Practices can also have a shadow side. Here exclusion marks this member's perception of foot washing as a child.

⁵⁵⁹ Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

“who always made the biggest cakes at homecoming. They were the most special people, I guess if there was anyone next to God I thought those ladies were.”⁵⁶⁰ Sixty-five years later, she describes those moments with those ladies with a degree of reverence and awe. Sitting in simple wooden chairs, they girded themselves with old torn towels that looked more like sheets. In front of each chair were plain white pails filled with water. These ladies would then kneel down in order to wash the other’s feet. She recalls how they “wore hose on each leg, not the pantyhose, and they would take them off so that their feet could be washed...I remember in later years when they would just sprinkle the foot with the hose on.”⁵⁶¹ For her it was an amazing experience.

Sometimes first memories are humorous. It is not unusual for participants to see the lighter side of the practice.⁵⁶² Remembering his own experiences as a child over sixty years ago, he remarks about a time his father asked him to get water for foot washing (the building lacked running water). Not knowing any different, he returned with ice water instead. Afterwards he and his father had a “conversation” about foot washing.⁵⁶³

Children sometimes find the experience more meaningful than adults. One member recalls how impressed she was by a child’s first experience of foot washing. Speaking of this child, she remembers, “I got to see it through her eyes, and [it was a cold

⁵⁶⁰ Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

⁵⁶¹ Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

⁵⁶² For example, this pastor describes how one night a “lady said she really was happy that we were doing communion that night because that meant she got her pantyhose washed.” Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁵⁶³ His father and several other men of the church were constructing the church at the time. Following work the men were going to have communion and foot washing. He explains, “They were out there working and daddy sent me, his sister lived just a short distance from the church, daddy sent me up to her house to get a pale of water...Well I didn’t know any different so I went up to get the pale of water. His sister’s name was [name], and Aunt [name] wanted to know what they wanted it for. I said, ‘I guess they’re working. I guess they’re wanting to drink it.’ So she fills it full of ice. When I get back, that’s when daddy took me aside and he said ‘we need to talk about feet washing’ [he begins laughing]. Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

day] she said, ‘Wow that makes you warm inside and out when you do that!’ It was so sweet and to see her from a child’s viewpoint, and I thought that was great.”⁵⁶⁴

One congregation’s children’s pastor tries to include foot washing as a part of the church educational program. As expected, children are initially reluctant to do foot washing for the first time. She explains, “My first group of kids were very reluctant. Some of them were very grossed out by the thought of touching someone else’s feet. Some of them were almost embarrassed of taking their own shoes and socks off in front of someone else.”⁵⁶⁵ Slowly through a process of education, children in her church have become more familiar with it. She makes sure to have lessons throughout the year, including a Lenten lesson.⁵⁶⁶ She also teaches foot washing on Sundays when a new member is baptized. In her church, deacons wash new converts’ feet before baptism. She has older children help her demonstrate washing their feet. Now her children, she explains, “have become more familiar with it...they don’t typically have that reaction that they used to because they have at least seen it, even if they haven’t experienced it. They usually...if they are a new kid and they haven’t seen it before then then they might be a little bit reluctant, but once they see the other kids doing it then they realize that this isn’t so bad, I can do this.”⁵⁶⁷ One pastor describes how, “A couple of years ago in our Bible school, our director washed all the children's feet, and talked about why we were doing that. And the little children would run up and sit there. I was amazed, I sat and watched, and they sat there so quietly. It was like they were in awe, I can't believe you're

⁵⁶⁴ Interview with OFWB member (G), January 29, 2015.

⁵⁶⁵ Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

⁵⁶⁶ About Lent she says, “Yes we include it in the lessons. I cover Jesus’ last week of his life. During the lent season in junior church. So that’s one of the lessons.” Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

⁵⁶⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

doing this.”⁵⁶⁸ Foot washing can be an amazing experience for children in OFWB churches.⁵⁶⁹

First experiences for adults often bring the same feelings of reluctance, embarrassment, and hesitation. It can be especially difficult for those with no prior experience with it. First time participants are unsure because it is so different from everything else they do in church.⁵⁷⁰ After returning to church in his early twenties, one pastor remembers, “I’ll never forget just the weirdness of taking your shoes off and somebody washing your feet and doing the same.”⁵⁷¹ Despite the “weirdness” of it, or maybe because of it, this pastor observes, “it made me see the elderly gentlemen in our church in a way I’d never seen them before, very vulnerable.”⁵⁷² Foot washing is a practice one needs to grow into. The first experience of it can be off putting and unusual. A member shares how for her, “I was a little embarrassed by it...but then as I have grown over the past four years spiritually I see it as a very humbling experience.”⁵⁷³

The first experience of foot washing is a kind of boundary crossing. This is not an imposed barrier, but rather a self-imposed one. It is, as one member says, a “barrier you have to cross in letting down your guard to participate in that.”⁵⁷⁴ One has to deal with one’s own issues regarding feet, the body, and intimacy. One needs to let go of

⁵⁶⁸ Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁵⁶⁹ An eleven-year old questionnaire respondent writes that foot washing is “like I’m literally walking in His [Jesus’] footsteps. Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (J), July 2014.

⁵⁷⁰ For example, a pastor describes foot washing as “probably unusual, weird, strange I guess. Being such a different event from anything else that takes place in the church, certainly the community at large, and I think that most of the individuals that participated in it, kind of felt that they too felt a level of ‘un-sureity.’” Interview with OFWB pastor (J), February 26, 2015.

⁵⁷¹ Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁵⁷² Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁵⁷³ Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

⁵⁷⁴ Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

preconceived ideas and notions regarding foot washing. Foot washing can be very easily misunderstood and feared. This same member explains, “It’s not foot washing like you think of washing something. It is, don’t worry, you don’t have to touch my foot if you don’t want too. You can hold the back of the leg, splash a little bit of water and you’re done.”⁵⁷⁵ There are also misconceptions involving women’s clothing and what one ought to wear in order to participate.⁵⁷⁶

Once these physical and mental barriers can be overcome, important experiences can take place.⁵⁷⁷ Participants are often surprised by the emotional feelings afterwards.⁵⁷⁸ The first time, in particular, can be powerful and overwhelming.⁵⁷⁹ Recalling a Holy Thursday service, a pastor remembers, “we washed feet and at least three or four men were there who had never washed feet before. They participated and I heard them talking. They said, ‘I’ve never done this before, but this is awesome, it’s an awesome feeling.’”⁵⁸⁰ This same pastor continued, “I think that for people that do it for the first time, it’s an overwhelming experience.”⁵⁸¹

⁵⁷⁵ Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

⁵⁷⁶ A pastor describes her frustration in trying to organize foot washing in a non-OFWB setting. She was attempting to organize foot washing as part of a divinity school chapel service with other members of a worship teams. She says, “I remember someone said ‘well a lot of our women wear pantyhose [unrelated to previous story about pantyhose] and so they couldn’t take off their pantyhose and participate.’ And I looked at them and said, ‘What? You don’t have to take off your pantyhose to participate. You’re just sprinkling water on the foot. It’s pretty much just absorbed. It dries very quickly.’ That was something that I would never even thought of as being a hindrance to washing feet. I guess for someone who had never participated in a foot washing service those were the kind of things that came to their mind.” Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

⁵⁷⁷ A questionnaire respondent describes how she now has “feelings of joy!” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (H), April 2015.

⁵⁷⁸ A questionnaire respondent writes, “My first time, I was twenty-five years old and it brought the most spiritual feeling over me! I felt nothing but peace.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (A), May 2014.

⁵⁷⁹ A questionnaire respondent writes that the first time, “[t]here was a whole new way of looking at my faith.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (D), May 2014.

⁵⁸⁰ Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁵⁸¹ Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

Speaking of a friend who grew up as a Southern Baptist, a pastor recalls the hesitation this friend had the first time he participated. Realizing that his friend was uncomfortable he told him, ““Come on, let’s do this together.””⁵⁸² Years later he says this person still tells “me how he will never forget that first night we washed feet together. Now he’s a deacon in our church, so that means a lot [to me].”⁵⁸³ An OFWB member tells how much it meant to him when the pastor washed his feet as a new member. The pastor “washed my feet and to me that, it meant something to me because here I am a new member of the church and the pastor’s washing my feet...I felt it through the Holy Spirit and what he was doing, but it meant a lot more than the, you know, he’s the pastor of the church.”⁵⁸⁴ The newness of it, combined with intimacy and physicality of foot washing, help first experiences as adults to be particularly meaningful and inspiring. Many report that once that self-imposed barrier of discomfort is crossed, the first experience can help put “things in a whole new light.”⁵⁸⁵ Some never forget the person who first washed his or her feet. For one respondent, it was a bonding experience that forever changed his relationship with the other. He explains that he “wouldn’t necessarily say we were friends, he was always cordial. But when he washed my feet that first time and he looked at me and told me said, ‘Look, I’m glad you’re back in church and I love you and I’m glad you’re here’ and he gave me a hug. There was no more authentic experience in this church.”⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸² Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁵⁸³ Interview with OFWB (H), February 3, 2015

⁵⁸⁴ Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁵⁸⁵ This member stated that, “I knew what washing feet was about. I understood and had read the passage. Until I experienced it. Yes it puts things in a whole new light. After I understood it in its fullest I wondered why more churches weren’t doing it.” Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁵⁸⁶ Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

The Pastor's Role in Foot Washing

Explaining how foot washing teaches service and servanthood is shown than said. Pastors recognize they have an uphill battle. Some newcomers are cautious of anything that appears ritualistic. One pastor explains the challenge he faces because “we [OFWBs] have an inherent bias and/or fear of anything that almost seems or thinks or smells of sacramentalism that is somehow...magically something is going to happen.”⁵⁸⁷

Overcoming this fear means a concerted effort to reach out and form relationships with those hesitant. A pastor follows up explaining that, “The only way we can get this in the people's thought is through relationship. If we don't have intimate relationships with people, if we don't engage people, if we don't disciple people, in these things we can say this is required, it's useless. People are doing because they feel like they got to. We have to build relationships with people to be able to explain it to them.”⁵⁸⁸

Some pastors and members describe frustration and disappointment when foot washing it is not taken seriously. One member remembers how much of an impact her experiences as a young married women had on her. She recalls how one particular group of women made foot washing a spiritual occasion. She describes how she can still remember “those ladies...when they went back, when they went to the room, there was no talking. It was quiet and they sung the old hymns. They sung Amazing Grace. I still get chill bumps. I remember just what I was feeling of how special that was. It was a different sound then singing at the church. It was just really different and those ladies were serious about it.”⁵⁸⁹ She compares this to OFWB churches that do not take foot

⁵⁸⁷ Focus group (A) interview with OFWB pastor, June 28, 2015.

⁵⁸⁸ Focus group (A) interview with OFWB pastor, June 28, 2015.

⁵⁸⁹ Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

washing seriously. She remembers, “I have been in some places, it was not taken to me, seemingly very seriously. Talking and laughter and that's probably fine, but that wasn't the way that to me it seemed it should be because it was a very serious time.”⁵⁹⁰ She goes on to state how after visiting one particular church, she “came away very upset because they had that that day and it didn't seem anybody took it seriously. I had no idea churches could do it that way. Because what I had experienced, even though my earlier years, it was very quiet... it was spiritual. It was a spirit filled time. If I ever felt that I could feel the Holy Spirit almost touching, that was a time that I could do it.”⁵⁹¹ In her experience it was “just a very reverent time... When those older ladies were so reverent, it was just special.”⁵⁹²

This feeling of reverence can come in a variety of ways. Since OFWBs do not have a rubric for foot washing (other than John 13), congregations are free to follow their own particular customs. Each congregation has its own way to make foot washing special, meaningful, and reverent. Pastors may experience several variations of foot washing during their ministerial careers. This pastor explains that,

There [are] some settings it's [sic] very quiet. And that's not something that's limited to just one area of the OFWB. I think it depends on the setting going on in the congregation at that time. [If] there's been a tragedy or something then it affects what's taking place as you do feet washing. [At] other times, you would have a conversation which is usually leading toward biblical conversation... and then at other times you will have somebody that will break out singing Amazing

⁵⁹⁰ Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

⁵⁹¹ Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

⁵⁹² Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

Grace or Old Rugged Cross or some of those older hymns that they can sing without having to have a book in their hand. So it's not, it's kind of split across all three in a sense. It just depends on the atmosphere at the time.⁵⁹³

Pastors express frustration when other OFWB pastors do not conduct foot washing in a way that is meaningful and reverent. One pastor explains that “it's the kind of service you really put forth your very best and do the very best you can do in a service. For people to have that opportunity to understand what's happening to us...in the whole process as we experience that renewal, from the example that we have set, that he [Jesus] set, that we are now doing ourselves and renewing ourselves in him...but I don't think today that our ministers are emphasizing it enough.”⁵⁹⁴ A pastor puts it this way: “It can be completely not [spiritual] if I'm being honest with you. I've been in feet washing services where everyone is talking about the ball games, the weather, and not even think[ing] about what we're doing and it [does] not mean that much to them.”⁵⁹⁵ This level of conversation can lead some to believe that foot washing is losing its meaning.⁵⁹⁶ It can be, as one pastor stated, “as unholy an experience as you can imagine. I think it should be celebrated, this is a celebration. It should be uplifted.”⁵⁹⁷ Another pastor affirms the same point: “We must keep [foot washing] as holy as we possibly can...It's time for me to be still and know and be in a very worshipful atmosphere if I'm expecting to experience his divine love in my life at that moment. I guess the word would be high

⁵⁹³ Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁵⁹⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (B), March 26, 2015.

⁵⁹⁵ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁵⁹⁶ Describing this lost meaning, a questionnaire respondent writes that “everyone is talking about different things like the weather, or their backache rather than concentrating on Jesus during this act of humility. It almost seems to have lost its meaning and purpose when the discussion is on anything and everything but Jesus.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (I), June 2014.

⁵⁹⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

reverence.”⁵⁹⁸ If that level of reverence can be achieved, foot washing becomes more about the worship and less ritualistic.⁵⁹⁹

To emphasize the reverence of foot washing, some OFWB pastors make an effort to explain the importance of foot washing to their congregations. In an effort to instill this practice early, one church makes it a tradition to wash the feet of new converts before they are baptized.⁶⁰⁰ Others pastors suggest that participants sing hymns instead of talking.⁶⁰¹ Pastors may even devote the entire service in preparation for foot washing.⁶⁰² Some pastors suggest that it be conducted in complete silence so that the only sounds are those of the water and pots.⁶⁰³ Some will have married couples wash each other’s feet. A pastor shares, “I’ve heard of a minister that had his married couples pair up and wash one another’s feet. When he did that, he said, ‘Those couples had said they never washed feet of their spouse in the church.’ That was one of the most memorable times that they have ever experienced that ordinance when they did that.”⁶⁰⁴

⁵⁹⁸ Interview with OFWB pastor (B), March 26, 2015.

⁵⁹⁹ Explaining her most memorable experience of foot washing, a questionnaire respondent writes, “We actually had warm water and soap. It was at night. The lights were not bright. It was the most reverent, humbling feet washing service I have ever been in. It was more than just a ritual. It was truly a worship service.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (G), May 2014.

⁶⁰⁰ One pastor describes the custom, “the deacons come wash the new convert’s feet before they’re baptized, and then they go to the baptism... If there are ladies or girls involved they have their wives do the young girls. The deacons don’t do the young girls. That’s paired off the same way. That takes place prior to a baptism service. You see it done in different ways in different settings.” Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁶⁰¹ A pastor shares, “I’ve actually made our men, this past time and the time before, to try to sing a capella “Amazing Grace” while they’re involved in it. And that really slows them down. That brings in the Holy Spirit. Not concentrating on the ball game or the weather but concentrating on what they’re doing.” Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁶⁰² One member explains, “It’s really the preaching about it, about the significance of it more than the act itself. The service prepares us for it before we actually do the act.” Interview with OFWB member (F), March 17, 2015.

⁶⁰³ She describes that “in more recent days, our pastor suggested that during the time of Jesus all you could hear was the sound of water and the sounds of the pots and the water and things, and so we’ve been told to be silent during this and see how this affects you. So that more recently that’s what we’ve done. It’s kind of a solemn occasion trying to remember what it was like for Jesus and the disciples.” Interview with OFWB member (G), January 29, 2015.

⁶⁰⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (I), February 2, 2015.

Despite these efforts, because foot washing involves moving around, some OFWBs see foot washing as less serious than other worship practices. A pastor who regularly deals with this issues explains,

I...explain to them that this is a reverent part of the service. Just because we're moving around and washing each other feet, doesn't mean that it's a time that you can be irreverent. I encourage them to be quiet and holy. To be prayerful. If someone breaks out in singing, join along and sing. But just think about what you're doing and what it represents. I found out that if you'll talk to them ahead of time, if you'll prepare them for what's about to happen. When you're washing each other's feet, it's not a time to talk about the weather or how the crops are doing or if you been fishing lately, something like that. It's actually a part of the service.⁶⁰⁵

Other pastors attempt to modify how and where foot washing is done in order to keep it reverent. The simplest method is to conduct it in the sanctuary rather than splitting men and women into separate parts of church. This pastor explains his procedure,

I had space, like at the front of my church in Greenville, and I would have the ladies together on the front pews. Then I had the men set up at the back of the church so we were all in the same room and this created a more reverent time. Sometimes when you leave the sanctuary and congregated yourself to rooms to wash feet, other people would get off track of what we were there about... I stay at the center and remind them that this is not the time that we do that. This is a time we need to be reflecting on what this ordinance means and just spiritually reviving us to really be the servants that God has called us to be.⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰⁵ Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁶⁰⁶ Interview with OFWB pastor (I), February 2, 2015.

In a similar manner, OFWB pastors increasingly like to have the congregation do foot washing in the same location, together, not separated by gender. As a young man, one pastor did not like the idea of separating men and women before foot washing. He decided to put a table in the fellowship hall between the men and the women. He says, “Women on one side, men on the other. But we’re in the same room. We still gather, basically holding hands and sharing testimony, but we do it with the women. So that we’re all together.”⁶⁰⁷

Education about foot washing is not just for the congregation alone. Sometimes even deacons and other leaders of the church need to be reminded about how foot washing should be practiced. One pastor explained that before practicing foot washing, or any ordinance, he will “talk about the meaning of the practices. I will take the time to talk about what we’re doing and why we’re doing that. I’ll talk with deacons in the churches about how we actually practice it.”⁶⁰⁸ This same pastor also serves as a professor at the University of Mount Olive, where he made foot washing especially meaningful for a group of students. Student fellowship had invited him to lead a Holy Thursday service in the campus chapel. He decided to make the focus of the evening on foot washing. He describes the scene:

I had the basins and the towel. We had the students and I talked to them about it and I explained what we were doing and why I felt that it was important. I think that there was about twelve students that were there, so very informal, and I invited the students to participate if they wanted to. I had one of the students that I’d already spoken to who was willing for me to wash his feet so that the others

⁶⁰⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁶⁰⁸ Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

could see actually how it could be done. Right on down to me girding myself with the towel and rolling up my shirt sleeves. All twelve of the students participated and most, including me, with tears in their eyes. It was a very meaningful experience.⁶⁰⁹

The People's Role in Foot Washing

Often it is the people, not the pastor, who make foot washing meaningful. Pastors may set the scene, but the people bring foot washing to life. The relationships formed during foot washing bring long time practitioners back to the practice. OFWBs look forward to it.

Foot washing brings the congregation together. A member explains that foot washing creates a much tighter bond among those who participate. She does not have that same feeling of closeness to other members of her church. She maintains, "It definitely draws you closer...there is a different type of closeness there. It's on another level. They are even more family. I guess it would be more akin to it being your immediate family versus your extended second [or] third cousin, great great aunt kind of. It's a much, much tighter bond."⁶¹⁰ For her, it creates a safe space where she has "a chance to put down that barrier that we put up and see that people really aren't going to make fun of us there not going to talk about us you know. These people really are my family. And they really do have my back."⁶¹¹

Younger members may be awed when they wash the feet of older members.

⁶⁰⁹ Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁶¹⁰ Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

⁶¹¹ Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

My favorite part is, there's this one lady in our church. She's almost 92. A faithful, faithful woman. It is such an honor when I get the chance to wash Miss Helen's feet. She's going to make sure she's there. Her health is not great, but she is going to be there no matter what. Just the example she has set, and I've known her all my life, and so I've known the struggles that she's been through in her life. Seeing how poised she has always been and how Godly she has lived her life despite all the hardships she's been through, to get the opportunity to serve her is just wonderful.

Foot washing can also bring about the unexpected. There are occasions where people act uncharacteristically emotional following foot washing. For example, there was an older man in his congregation who was known very quiet and reserved. He hardly ever spoke a word. However, following foot washing, this man would break his silence in a very emotional and powerful way. It was the custom of this church to hold hands together in a circle, giving time so that each individual could share or give a prayer request. It just so happens, “every time it came to him, he get tears in his eyes and he just kind of squeezed the guy’s hands to the right and to the left so that guy could say his [prayer request] or whatever. This one guy, he never said anything out in public. In that room, with tears in his eyes...what he was saying was, ‘You know I love you guys, I love all of you guys.’ Something like that every time. That's all he would say.”⁶¹² He goes on to say that in that circle, it was not unusual to see “grown men you've looked up to all your life, looking up too, big guys don't cry, weeping you know it really does change the way you see people.”⁶¹³ The love OFWB people experience during foot washing creates

⁶¹² Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁶¹³ Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

opportunities for emotional participation. It may help motivate individuals to share, especially those who might otherwise stay silent. As OFWBs practice foot washing, “It’s kind of like saying I love you, and most of the time when I wash, I try to make sure I do a different one every time. I try to respond with a different person every time, and usually when I complete that task one of the things I do before I stand up is to look up at them and say ‘I love in Christ.’ That’s what I think it says.”⁶¹⁴ Everyone is expressing that same love, and “everybody is on the same level doing the same thing and very seldom do you ever hear any argument or any discord or anything in that direction.”⁶¹⁵ Because one has already opened oneself up to another person, there is an incentive to open oneself up to the larger group.⁶¹⁶

Foot washing is also a chance to bring people on the outside. Pastors and members describe it as an inclusive experience that helps to break down feelings of animosity that can develop between individuals. For people on the outside, it gives them a chance to become a part of the church family.⁶¹⁷ It helps to develop a “sense familiarity and the sense of family, belonging, when you do something like that. The people who

⁶¹⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁶¹⁵ Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁶¹⁶ A member explains that “there are people who open up with a prayer request of a praise report who otherwise wouldn’t have done it in a larger setting. But with [the] smaller setting, I think it is, it comes after you’ve opened yourself up as to ‘hey I’ve already opened to doing foot washing. I’m just going to jump right on in and ask for this prayer for this problem that I’m having.” Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

⁶¹⁷ For example a pastor reached out to a troubled member of the community in order to teach how foot washing demonstrates humility, love, and service for all. Remembering, a pastor says, “We just happened to have a visitor that Sunday. I’ll be frank with you, he wasn’t just a visitor. He had a little bit of a reputation because he had experienced some trouble with the law. I’ll just go that far. He was the guest of one of my lay people so I approached him before the worship service and I was very frank with him [and I said to him], ‘Would you be offended if I washed your feet during this service?’ He was very gracious and he agreed. I got one my teenage boys and I said, ‘Look I want you to get a pitcher of warm water, have it ready to go, and at the appropriate time I will nod and that will be the signal for you to go get it because I’m going to demonstrate feet washing.’ I came to that part of the service and that’s exactly what I did.” Focus group interview (A) with OFWB pastor, June 28, 2015.

have been on the fringe, might would feel it [foot washing] brings them into the group.”⁶¹⁸ Foot washing is a way for OFWBs to demonstrate the value and importance of each person, especial those who feel like they do not deserve it.⁶¹⁹

For OFWBs, foot washing is an opportunity to bring together people as equals.⁶²⁰ In foot washing, it is not unusual for the old and the young, rich and poor, the powerful and weak, and so on to wash each other’s feet.⁶²¹ It is a moment where status no longer matters. What is important "is the drawing of you and I [sic] as brothers to the point that we can hug one another in Christian atmosphere and say ‘I love you brother.’ I think it's that...that humbles you, both of you, to the point where you recognize you're now equal regardless of your station in life. I think that's important, that we meet one another as equals at the foot of the cross.”⁶²² Foot washing is a way of telling people that “[n]obody’s too great to wash feet. Nobody is not worthy of having their feet washed. Their all valued but we’re all equally valued. I think it’s kind of an equalizer.”⁶²³ All people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.⁶²⁴

⁶¹⁸ Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁶¹⁹ A member shares how “it was almost like being exalted when somebody kneeled down and washed my feet. I thought to myself, ‘I’m the last person that needs their feet washed. I need to wash everybody’s feet in this church. Set it up on a regular basis.’ That’s how ashamed I was of my actions before I turned to Christ. That guy still told me he loved me.” Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁶²⁰ Explaining this equality, a questionnaire respondent writes, “When I get down on my knees and wash my sister’s feet and they in turn do the same, for me on sister is not greater than the other.” Questionnaire response from OFWB member, Church (C), June 2014.

⁶²¹ At that moment position and status no longer matter. A member shares in a focus group that, “The washing of the feet kind of brings you closer to your fellow Christians because...it takes away your earthly positions. Everybody’s equal, they’re all the same.” Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁶²² Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁶²³ Interview with OFWB member (G), January 29, 2015.

⁶²⁴ A questionnaire respondent echoes this sentiment writing that foot washing is an “opportunity to bow before the Saints of our church and wash their feet to let them know that we love and respect them.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (C), June 2014.

It is this sense of love and equality that helps to strengthen, deepen, and repair relationships among OFWBs. Foot washing is a continually reminder of the desire for love and compassion between one another.⁶²⁵ Each time it is practiced, opportunities are created that allow members to become better connected to one another. It reinforces the need to serve one another, especially towards those who are in conflict or disagreement.

I think [foot washing] builds connections amongst the membership of the church. [It] does deepen the intimacy that is called to be held within the church, so it strengthens our commitment to serve to those who sit next to us in the pews. I think that it is also a way of healing and repairing broken relationships... I think the practice of foot washing can be and in many instances is a way for people who have had differences or disagreements to meet in a sacred space, and to share in a moment of repair, if you will, to a broken relationship.

Forgiveness

Foot washing can be a way to heal broken relationships. It is a moving experience for both the washer and the one being washed. It brings individuals together into a shared path of love and forgiveness. Foot washing offers an alternative when words do not work. Not all people can bring oneself to say “I am sorry,” and for some, foot washing can begin a healing process. A pastor described two ladies who had been verbally attacking one another for years. The relationship had completely deteriorated. Yet, one night the “Holy Spirit convicted this other lady of her things and she turned around and they switched places [during foot washing] and before they left that night their difference had been healed through the fact that they were washing each other’s feet. It only happened

⁶²⁵ Questionnaire respondent believes that foot washing, “creates a desire for love and compassion for others.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (F), September 2014.

because one of them was willing to empty themselves and say, ‘look whatever I’ve done let me wash your feet.’”⁶²⁶ Experiencing this first hand, one member describes how foot washing helps her repair relationships with others. She describes moments when “I’ve been a little irritated with somebody and I’ve had to wash their feet, and that sort of gives you a perspective. That’s happened to me twice. You realize that this person is very precious and I think it’s a real humbling thing, especially if you’re irritated with someone. You’ve got to have the right attitude.”⁶²⁷

OFWB pastors can only make space for moments like this. These moments cannot be forced. OFWB people make these moments happen. It is not about the status and importance of the pastor. OFWB foot washing involves everyday people undergoing real issues, disagreements, and complex situations. In the OFWB, foot washing is a way to live community. Foot washing can be a first step towards reconciliation and renewing the bonds within the community.⁶²⁸

Two deacons were feuding over the placement of a landfill within their community. Being on opposing sides of the issues, there was a deep seeded animosity between these two deacons. According to the pastor, “This thing went around and around and one of the men, the one who was opposed to it, had some documents put in his mailbox, basically not too nice and polite about his opposition. He thought that other guy in the church did it and he blamed him for it publicly. Well, he found out that those documents came from someone else.”⁶²⁹ After falsely accusing his fellow deacon, this

⁶²⁶ Focus group (A) interview with OFWB pastor, June 28, 2015.

⁶²⁷ Interview with OFWB member (G), January 29, 2015.

⁶²⁸ Foot washing is a reminder, according to a questionnaire respondent, “to always treat others as Jesus would. No matter what comes our way.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (H), April 2014.

⁶²⁹ Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

man scheduled an emergency meeting of the deacon board and “he went before the other deacons and publicly acknowledged ‘I have sinned against my brother, and I’m profoundly sorry, and I don’t believe that I can officiate at the table tonight until I’ve made peace with my brother.’ We prayed together, he served at the table, and then he washed his feet.”⁶³⁰ For OFWBs, foot washing is “fleshing out what it means to be a person that would call himself out to the name of Jesus. As a servant people we have to learn to forgive, there can be no genuine community apart from forgiveness. I think that washing of feet fleshes out that community.”⁶³¹ One can be lead into the experience of love and forgiveness without needing words.⁶³²

Relationship

OFWBs are not surprised that foot washing can lead to these experiences. It is not a mystery for OFWBs. Because foot washing forms intimate and familial bonds, members who practice are naturally closer to one another. OFWBs themselves make the experience of foot washing special. As a pastor puts it, “I think for me, the individuals, [in the past] I’ve had the opportunity to share in that practice, it does deepen one’s relationship. As a pastor I think it would be safe to say that for me, overall I was closer to the men with whom I participated in foot washing as opposed to those who didn’t practice it or didn’t attend those services. Not that there weren’t friendships there, I think it made a difference in the connections that I had with members of the congregation.”⁶³³ It is, another pastor believes that foot washing is, “a shared experience...It’s a unifying thing

⁶³⁰ Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁶³¹ Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁶³² Foot washing reminds OFWBs of the need to serve and be forgiven. Foot washing, a questionnaire respondent writes, [r]eminds me to have a servant’s heart and that we have to allow Jesus to cleanse us of sin.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (D), May 2014.

⁶³³ Interview with OFWB pastor (J), February 26, 2015.

once you let it. It really, really will.”⁶³⁴ Foot washing is a way to build corporate relationship among OFWB congregations. Drawing individuals closer together, foot washing promotes community rather than individualism.⁶³⁵ Foot washing, according to an interviewed pastor, “is a tool to develop relationship and develop that community, and that is an avenue and model that is in John thirteen for us to emulate. Not the individualist idea that we have. A community of fellowship and intimacy.”⁶³⁶

These experiences inspire OFWBs to continue foot washing. As a multigenerational practice, it causes one to reflect on the history of the practice and those deceased members of the community.⁶³⁷ For many, they are doing the same thing their parents and grandparents did. These experiences last a lifetime for OFWBs. At each instance of foot washing, they re-connect with the past and the present. It is an experience that OFWBs want to pass on to their children and grandchildren.⁶³⁸ Even the pails and the towels carry the history of those who came before. As one prepares for foot washing, a deacon says,

You’re getting those pails out, these are the same pails that were potentially used forty or fifty years ago. It’s just a feeling of history and a feeling of foundation in the church when you’re getting those [pails] out. And those long towels that you try to wrap around your waist, and they seem to get shorter as time goes on.

⁶³⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁶³⁵ A questionnaire respondent writes, “I feel it draws me closer to my church family, Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (A), May 2014.

⁶³⁶ Focus group (A) interview with OFWB pastor, June 28, 2015.

⁶³⁷ A questionnaire respondent writes that she is “[g]rateful to have shared this experience with family and elder church members that are no longer with us.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (H), April 2014.

⁶³⁸ A member shares that “it was an honor to be able to wash my son’s feet. I hope it would carry on to him. We have a grandchild now, he’s two and a half. I hope it will carry on with him. For my grandson to pass on that feeling, and I think it will. I really do.” Interview with OFWB member (H), January 26, 2015.

You're using the same towels, potentially, that we used twenty years ago. Only used four times a year so they'll last a long, long time. It's not only a spiritual thing, but it puts you up with the history of the church and the history of the denomination. That you're still doing it the old way. There's not any modern way of washing feet itself. Taking the pail, and getting down on your knees putting their feet in the pail, in little pans. And using these old chipped pans and these old towels like that, it sort of adds an importance and a solemnity to it. I don't know what the right word is, but it enriches it so much more and this is nothing that the world can really change or modernize. It makes it maybe a little bit sweeter and a little bit more important doing it that way.⁶³⁹

The Effects of Foot Washing on Original Free Will Baptists

Foot Washing and Humility

OFWB pastors and members have a lot to say regarding foot washing. OFWB participants consider this a rich practice. Three words seem to define foot washing: “Humility, service, servant.”⁶⁴⁰ Interviewees were asked to describe what words came to mind when they thought of foot washing. Almost all interviewees named one of these words or a common variant. For example, fifteen out of nineteen interviewees named humility as a word that they immediately thought of at the mention of foot washing. Repeatedly interviewees and questionnaire respondents named humility as the defining quality of foot washing.⁶⁴¹ Foot washing is, a prominent pastor says, is “an expression of

⁶³⁹ Interview with OFWB member (H), January 26, 2015.

⁶⁴⁰ Interview with OFWB member (F), March 17, 2015.

⁶⁴¹ One questionnaire respondent writes that every time foot washing is practice, “I experience a feeling of humbleness and a little anxiety.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (B), June 2014.

humility, humbleness, being willing to become that low with your brothers and sisters in Christ.”⁶⁴² One former member, when remembering his experiences as a boy, responded by saying, “The beauty, the solemnity, the humility that washing of the saints’ feet demonstrated to believers is, I don’t know how to say, it’s very humbling to do that.”⁶⁴³ For others the humility of foot washing connects to the humility of Jesus Christ. There is a direct correlation between the humility of Jesus and the humility of foot washing. When asked what first came to mind about foot washing, a pastor proudly proclaimed, “First is humility, seeing the example of Christ and [Jesus] bowing and kneeling before his disciples and washing their feet knowing what he was about to go through very soon, and knowing the reality that he had to wash Judas’ feet. That’s a very humbling thing in my heart. It really is.”⁶⁴⁴ This idea of humility is not an intellectual knowledge of the act. The connection between foot washing and humility is more than association. It is connecting with a feeling that goes beyond explanation. One interviewee described her first reaction to foot washing as follows, “The very first word I think, I know the feeling, if I could just get the word...Humility, I guess that’s probably the very first. It’s a very humbling experience.”⁶⁴⁵

Naturally and without hesitation, foot washing provoke rich and profound feelings on humility for interviewees. The mention of foot washing brings them to a special state or place connected to their own knowledge and experience of humility. This connection between foot washing and humility flows from the OFWB heritage regarding foot

⁶⁴² Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁶⁴³ Interview with OFWB member (C), son of an OFWB pastor, June 30, 2015.

⁶⁴⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁶⁴⁵ Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

washing. The OFWB *Articles of Faith* describes foot washing as way to teach humility.⁶⁴⁶ OFWB pastors and members have developed their own ideas and definitions on humility, its connection with foot washing, and the example of Jesus Christ. The life, teachings, and example Jesus set are never far from the minds of the OFWB. When asked to describe humility, one pastor describes it as “being able to realize that...it’s an honor to reach out and help someone else or to serve someone else.”⁶⁴⁷ Humility is connected to the way one thinks of himself or herself. To be humble is to place oneself before God and recognize that one is no greater than any other person. One surrenders before God in order to understand how to place oneself at another person’s level. God is above all, the true teacher of what it means to be humble. Humility, one pastor explains, “means humbling myself before God and other people, to do the things that would serve them.”⁶⁴⁸ According to one member, humility begins with God, so much so that it is “giving God all the credit and glory for the things that he’s done, who we are and the blessings we’ve received.”⁶⁴⁹ Humility is for some a spiritual feeling. It is opening oneself to the invitation of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵⁰ The presence of God creates that space where one can learn, experience, and live humbly. It is not just an individual experience according to OFWBs. Humility directly translates into one’s life and ministry. It is “[b]eing able to understand that others are just as important as you. Knowing that their lives are things

⁶⁴⁶ Original Free Will Baptists, *The Articles of Faith*, 52.

⁶⁴⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁶⁴⁸ Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁶⁴⁹ She continues saying, “It’s not looking for recognition or credit for anything we do personally, but knowing that all that we do is through God.” Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

⁶⁵⁰ To understand humility “means that I do not understand the love that has descended upon me as that of a dove. Descending through the Holy Spirit upon my life. It causes me to humble myself to be the follower that he has asked me to be and to do [foot washing] with my brother, and at that point I am recommitting myself to my own call. Interview with OFWB pastor (B), March 26, 2015.

that matter and [are] important. That you're willing to humble or lower yourself to the point where you'd be a servant."⁶⁵¹

Foot Washing, Service, and Servant Leadership

First thoughts of foot washing almost inevitably come to service and servanthood for OFWBs.⁶⁵² Foot washing naturally inspires thoughts of service. Foot washing plants the seed for service.⁶⁵³ It is, as one pastor describes, "Absolutely the first thing that comes to my mind."⁶⁵⁴ Like humility, OFWB interviewees have strong thoughts and feelings regarding service. One pastor stated that she defines it as, "Anything that we do for someone else. Especially something that we would be doing for someone that we wouldn't normally do... or normally come in contact with or lowering of ourselves in order to help someone else in need."⁶⁵⁵ OFWB interviewees express service as putting other people first. Pastors and members argue that service is a necessary part of the Christian experience. First and foremost service is the ability "to do something for the good of someone else. To help someone else."⁶⁵⁶

Foot washing and service have a direct connection and relationship according to interviewees. Foot washing is a practical practice that "if you understand it correctly...teaches us about our role as servants of the kingdom."⁶⁵⁷ This pastor goes on to say that foot washing helps impart the servant leadership he seeks for his congregation

⁶⁵¹ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁶⁵² "[Foot washing] reminds me to be a servant to all people, rich and poor, saint and sinner." Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (A), May 2014.

⁶⁵³ A deacon claims, "I'm not saying that's [foot washing] the only way, but it can plant a seed to make you more community minded in giving and service." Interview with OFWB member (H), January 26, 2015.

⁶⁵⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁶⁵⁵ Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

⁶⁵⁶ Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁶⁵⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (I), February 2, 2015.

both in and outside the church walls.⁶⁵⁸ Members echo this same sentiment when asked what service and servanthood means to them. One OFWB interviewee says that to her, servanthood means “we are to serve each other, and I think foot washing is a way to show that and to experience that and the experience of closeness it brings as part of fellowship.”⁶⁵⁹

For OFWBs, service is tied directly to the example set by Jesus Christ.⁶⁶⁰ Jesus, as stated by one member, “Though he was Lord, he presented himself as a servant in the sense that he was going the servant’s path by washing the disciples’ feet. Even though he was their Lord.”⁶⁶¹ Jesus Christ is the standard bearer of what it means to be a servant.⁶⁶² OFWBs see foot washing as a visible reminder of the standard of humility and service set by Jesus, which all people are called to emulate.⁶⁶³ This same member says, “Feet washing in itself is not an end, it’s just a beginning of a service that we should look too, to continue this humility and servanthood that Jesus set the example for.”⁶⁶⁴

⁶⁵⁸ This pastor goes on to explain that “I have tried to emphasize in my churches for the people that don’t know it, it’s really not necessarily washing the feet for cleansing. That’s what we practice now in person, but I think we practice it for the purpose of teaching us what it means [to be a] fellow Christian. You’re their servant, you are to serve with them.” Interview with OFWB pastor (I), February 2, 2015.

⁶⁵⁹ Interview with OFWB member (G), January 29, 2015.

⁶⁶⁰ A questionnaire respondent shares that foot washing is a reminder “that we are to be servants to others just as Jesus was a servant to the disciples. Jesus is much more important than I am. If he humbled himself in this way, how much more so should I.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (E), September 2014.

⁶⁶¹ Interview with OFWB member (F), March 17, 2015.

⁶⁶² A questionnaire respondent shares, “I feel so close to those whom I am participating and with Him. He is a part of it [foot washing]. I want to be like Him.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (B), June 2014.

⁶⁶³ A pastor believes that “if it was good enough for our Lord to do and he saw the necessity of us doing it, it’s something that we should likewise do as well.” Interview with OFWB pastor (K), February 12, 2015.

⁶⁶⁴ Interview with OFWB member (F), March 17, 2015.

The service component of foot washing carries with it a tangible connection to the physical world.⁶⁶⁵ It is a reminder that Christians are called to serve the physical world.⁶⁶⁶ One pastor suggests that foot washing is an incarnational act. It reminds believes that Jesus was incarnate in the flesh. Foot washing is a deeply physical and “fleshy”⁶⁶⁷ act that reminds one that service is physical. Foot washing shows OFWBs that they should be doing things for others.⁶⁶⁸ Serving, one member explains, “is serving people as children, serving the world by showing his love and his mercy and his kindness and forgiveness.”⁶⁶⁹ Foot washing suggests that it is better to serve than to be served.⁶⁷⁰ Service requires humility. Foot washing is a reminder of those two concepts so that one is equipped to help “another person be a better person and lower yourself to not feel greater or bigger or wiser or smarter or anything than anyone else.”⁶⁷¹

OFWB interviewees and questionnaire respondents agree that, to some degree, foot washing demonstrates or represents the concepts of humility and service. It is the living expression of these themes, more importantly, it connects to the person and ministry of Jesus Christ who embodies these themes. These are “virtues that have been

⁶⁶⁵ Writing about this connection with daily life, a questionnaire respondent explains that foot washing “is a reminder to be humble in all that you do. Also to always put others before yourself.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (E), September 2014.

⁶⁶⁶ For example, a questionnaire respondent writes, “Kneeling and splashing water on a fellow Christian’s feet reminds me of the importance of humility, servant-hood, and the need for daily cleansing of my sins.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (B), June 2014.

⁶⁶⁷ One pastor repeatedly used this term to describe foot washing’s physicality. Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁶⁶⁸ This pastor makes the theological argument that “[Jesus] came in the flesh to minister to people who are in the flesh...it reminds [Christians] that we are obligated to serve our brothers and sisters in Christ, in the flesh, in the body.” Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁶⁶⁹ Interview with Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

⁶⁷⁰ This same member goes on to say, “I see people that take things for granted and expect to be served instead of serving in the Christian community and that bothers me. There are not enough people willing to take on a servant’s role. They expect the church to serve them.” Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

⁶⁷¹ Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015

embodied by Christ throughout his life and ministry and it's that sort of virtuous living that Christians are expected to embody in their own life. And I think the practice of foot washing is a...tangible way that believers are able to show what is supposed to look like in the world."⁶⁷² Foot washing demonstrates the OFWB character. Through humility, service, and servanthood, foot washing "fundamentally portrays how we were called to live as a redeemed people."⁶⁷³ According to one OFWB pastor, the thought and experience of foot washing inspires the feeling that "this is what Christianity is really all about. It's about getting on your knees and serving."⁶⁷⁴

Pastors and members both share ways that foot washing has helped them view service and servant leadership.⁶⁷⁵ The actions teach and remind practicing OFWBs of the roles they serve both in their churches and outside into the larger community. Every time foot washing is practiced in OFWB churches, there is an intent that participants gain a desire to serve others.⁶⁷⁶

Many OFWBs see service as the explicit goal of foot washing. Take for example this pastor who says, "I think that it is a formative practice. Much like someone getting on a treadmill every day to lose weight or better their level of fitness. I think the practice forms us and shapes us to more rightly reflect the image of Christ. In that act of kneeling and washing another person's feet, I think it demonstrates the level of service,

⁶⁷² Interview with OFWB pastor (J), February 26, 2015.

⁶⁷³ Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁶⁷⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁶⁷⁵ For example, a questionnaire respondent writes, "It [foot washing] helps me understand and appreciate the humble attitude we must assume to do as he would have us do. A person cannot lead until he know how to follow." Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (F), September 2014.

⁶⁷⁶ Foot washing gives participants a first taste of service. A questionnaire respondent explains that foot washing is important for "experiencing the opportunity to have the servant heart and attitude." Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (H), April 2015.

commitment, or devotion that we are called to have not only [to] people in the church, but more importantly the people out in the community.⁶⁷⁷

Each time it is performed, members and pastors are reminded of the need to serve one another. Because each person has the opportunity to serve and be served, members learn the importance of equality.⁶⁷⁸ This moment is not only for the pastors and deacons, it is for all willing to get on their knees and serve. Foot washing can be a powerful motivator, especially when one realizes that it is something one receives and gives. A member explains her feelings when she realizes “that we all are serving and yet we serve one another. So you’re not just a servant, you’re being served as well. And that’s an amazing thing about the church, if the church in general realized that we are here to serve each other. So we’re all being served, but we are all serving. Nobody is just a servant and nobody is a master. We’re all the same.”⁶⁷⁹

Pastors take this equality seriously. For pastors, foot washing is an opportunity to demonstrate servant leadership. It reminds the congregation that the pastor is a servant.⁶⁸⁰ Perhaps even more than other denominations, the role of an OFWB pastor is to serve the congregation as an equal. Pastors are not immune to the temptation of power and influence. Foot washing is a physical and visible embodiment of the dangers of power. Working in a higher education setting, this pastor describes how “washing of the saints’

⁶⁷⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (J), February 26, 2015.

⁶⁷⁸ Foot washing helps one questionnaire respondent to “remember that everyone is important, no matter what/who they are or their circumstances.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (H), April 2015.

⁶⁷⁹ Interview with OFWB member (G), January 29, 2015.

⁶⁸⁰ “I think it’s something that brings me back down to earth. Sometimes you get so caught up in the day to day work, and it’s easy to get bigger than ourselves. When we wash feet I am reminded as I get down that this is where the Lord was, this is where he expects me to be.” Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

feet reinforces my need to fear power. Particularly my own...I have basically been trained to be fearful of power.”⁶⁸¹ Foot washing teaches him that “in the exercise of power I must first and foremost be a servant of Christ and his church. The people I seek to lead, I have to first and foremost be their servant. I have to be reminded of that because left to my own devices I don’t think I would like me very much...I need those tangible reminders.”⁶⁸²

Foot washing reminds pastors that everyone is equal. Pastors are not more important than anyone else.⁶⁸³ A pastor explains that in “the church as well as anywhere, there's always someone who thinks I've gotten a little bit higher office or I've got a little bit more important to role play in the church. They get a basin of water and put a towel around their waist, there's no greater or higher levels of anybody. We're all on equal ground.”⁶⁸⁴ He continues, “You wash feet to bring you to that point where everybody is on the same playing field. Servant hood is not that difficult of a thing. It’s more of a joy than it is a duty...It becomes more of a servant attitude that’s coming from my heart instead of a ritual or from duty.”⁶⁸⁵ In this way, OFWB leaders see foot washing as setting the leadership standard. Foot washing “shows servant leadership and the need for leaders within our church, within any of our organizations to serve instead of necessarily taking all of the glory that the position can hold.”⁶⁸⁶

⁶⁸¹ Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁶⁸² Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁶⁸³ For example, this pastor claims that foot washing “reminds me that just because I’m in a leadership position within a congregation, that doesn’t mean that I’m any better than anyone else and that we’re all on an equal playing field in God’s eyes.” Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

⁶⁸⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁶⁸⁵ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁶⁸⁶ Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

Foot washing is a way to remind OFWB pastors of their duty to serve the congregation and community. It is their moment of self-reflection. It is an opportunity to look back and see if one has truly been a servant leader. Foot washing is a necessity for pastors, for if “I’m not willing to wash someone else’s feet, I can’t expect anyone else to. It’s just one of those things. Not only is it a humbling experience for me, it’s an opportunity for me to lead the people. That’s why we do that publicly when we are ordaining deacons and other things because I want them to see that.”⁶⁸⁷ In OFWB churches, foot washing is the public acknowledgement that pastors are equal to everyone else. One pastor insists that foot washing teaches him that “I’m on the same level as my members, as far as spirituality goes. I might have been called to be a pastor, but that doesn’t mean I’m above them. We are workers together...So I think it reminds us that we’re all the same level; when you kneel down to wash someone’s feet.”⁶⁸⁸ Foot washing is an identity many OFWB pastors take without hesitation.⁶⁸⁹ Without this identity, one pastor wonders if “I would actually be as communally minded, and service minded, and socially minded as I am.”⁶⁹⁰ He goes on to explain that, “In our articles of faith and our symbols for our denomination actually has the basin and the towel on it...For me that speaks volumes of what the Christian experience is supposed to be. We take up our cross like we’re supposed to and go into the world to service.”⁶⁹¹ As an OFWB, foot washing has completely shaped and formed his personal theology.⁶⁹²

⁶⁸⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁶⁸⁸ Interview with OFWB pastor (I), February 2, 2015.

⁶⁸⁹ This pastor shares that “I wear a little lapel pin that has a basin and a towel. That speaks of a servant. That’s what Jesus intended it to be, serving each other.” Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁶⁹⁰ Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁶⁹¹ Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁶⁹² He explains, “To me my whole theology is shaped by OFWB doctrine [of] washing of the saints’ feet.” Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

Foot washing encourages OFWBs to become more socially and community minded. Service is part of the intent and meaning at every instance of foot washing. Of course much of this depends on the pastor's involvement. Foot washing can teach service, but it "depends on the leadership of that church along with the minister and how he does it."⁶⁹³

Pastors hope that foot washing triggers the response to serve, at least for those receptive to it. Those who have never served may be inspired to serve. Foot washing can be that experience that "triggers something within them as they are out in the community...to respond in different ways to the needs of the community. Because I have now become a servant and that's really what were supposed to do."⁶⁹⁴ It helps "you see the importance of what you do outside church."⁶⁹⁵ While there is some uncertainty as to whether it inspires service, there is an intention and hope that it will.⁶⁹⁶

Ultimately, OFWB foot washing initiates one into a different level of service. It initiates one into an intimate, personal, and hands on service. It creates a hope, among OFWBs, that foot washing will set one on the path towards a deeper level of service. It is a service based on relationship and connection. It is not enough that one serves others, rather there should be a spiritual and familial bond to that service. It is, as one young minister describes, "a different type of servitude. It's not going out and washing [another's] clothes or washing [their] car. This is touching another man's [or woman's]

⁶⁹³ Interview with OFWB pastor (B), March 26, 2015.

⁶⁹⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁶⁹⁵ Interview with OFWB pastor (K), February 12, 2015.

⁶⁹⁶ A member claims, "I think it probably [inspires service] does within our church. The wider community, I'm not sure it inspires service, but it may inspire service for those within our church to serve the wider community; to go out, to witness, to share the blessing that we received." Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

foot or feet. I think this is just one of those barriers that, I think, if not broken down, maybe the reason why Christianity is not doing as well in society today. Because you've got worthy people doing services all day. You got big companies out there doing it all the time. This is [what] differentiates us from the world."⁶⁹⁷ It differentiates OFWBs by the way foot washing embraces and encourages relationship, beyond the abstract. It is an incarnational act.⁶⁹⁸

Foot washing is an act that OFWBs believe should continue outside the church. It suggests a better way to live and act as Christian in the world.⁶⁹⁹ Thus OFWBs argue that foot washing is not just a performed ritual. Rather the goal is "[l]etting the imagery of washing the saints' feet play out in everyday life. As you love and respect your fellow man [or woman]."⁷⁰⁰ OFWBs see foot washing as something that carries over into everything one does. Foot washing is not an end, rather, "[l]et that be the beginning... We're supposed to carry that attitude of feet washing into our daily walk in serving the Lord by serving others."⁷⁰¹ Foot washing reminds one that "[w]e're to serve, not wait for somebody to pat us on the back and say what a good singer you are or good preacher you are or good deacon you are. That's not what our job is. Our job is to set an example of humbleness and servitude."⁷⁰²

Foot Washing and Transformation

⁶⁹⁷ Focus group (A) interview with OFWB pastor, June 28, 2015.

⁶⁹⁸ A pastor explains that foot washing "is one of the most incarnational things that we do. There is nothing more incarnational than the washing of the feet. Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁶⁹⁹ According to a questionnaire respondent, foot washing "helps me to remember that we should always remember to be humble in our daily lives as commanded by our Lord." Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (G), May 2014.

⁷⁰⁰ Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁷⁰¹ Interview with OFWB member (F), March 17, 2015.

⁷⁰² Interview with OFWB member (F), March 17, 2015.

Most experiences of foot washing are not instantly transformative. It is a gradual change that adds to one's Christian experience. OFWB pastors and members describe foot washing's effects as gradual and subtle. For many, it is hard to describe how foot washing has changed their Christian experience. This pastor says, "I don't know because it's always been a part of my life. So it's not like I've ever known the Christian walk without foot washing."⁷⁰³ Another pastor explains, "In terms of something I would compare to a Damascus road type or Philippian jailer, I've not seen anything like this, but I've seen more in the term persons recognizing a more noble calling of what the Christian life is supposed to look like."⁷⁰⁴ Therefore pastors will typically use words like "enriched"⁷⁰⁵ and "enhanced"⁷⁰⁶ rather than transform. Foot washing works in the background, carefully shaping the Christian character of OFWB participants. Its enhancing effects, one pastor says, "Makes me a better pastor, a better believer, a better servant...laity they think the pastor is a little bit more theologically advanced and more in touch with God or little more holier than thou, but once you get that basin and towel together you're all on the same plane. Everybody is equal in the Lord's sight there."⁷⁰⁷ Foot washing effects are not immediate, instead it adds to what is already present. Therefore foot washing does not change the Christian experience, instead "[i]t adds a sweetness to it...It helps make it sweeter because you're following the commandments of Christ, and I think any time you follow the instructions of Christ, it sweetens your faith and your Christianity."⁷⁰⁸

⁷⁰³ Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

⁷⁰⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁷⁰⁵ Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁷⁰⁶ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁷⁰⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015

⁷⁰⁸ Interview with OFWB member (H), January 26, 2015.

OFWBs experience foot washing's effects corporately as a community more so than individually. Foot washings effects are only noticeable in community. A member believes that she does not "think the act of foot washing has really transformed anyone that I know personally in a significantly different way other than to make them more humble and to make all of us feel like a Christian community, that Christian bond. I think collectively it's transforming."⁷⁰⁹ It is this collective experience that bonds the participants together. It is not the experience of foot washing alone that makes it meaningful. Having one's feet washed in isolation would not have the same effect it does with the wider community. Without foot washing, a long-serving pastor noted, "I don't believe you would have the bond of fellowship that you have with other believers in the same faith. I don't think it would be there. That is something that kind of bonds you together. Because to me it makes you realize that what we do is broader than I am and there's more people that really believe just like I do."⁷¹⁰ Without it, he believes, one would miss that connection. For OFWBs, foot washing creates a bond that goes beyond believing and doing the same things. Foot washing brings OFWBs together in a way that other practices cannot. Without foot washing, he reasons, "I don't think it would be that way because what do you have that would really tie you together like that does? I mean you may believe the same things, you may do different things within that belief, but once those things are beginning to fall into place and you spend that time together in those services, I think there's a bond there that [foot washing] creates that wouldn't be any other way."⁷¹¹

⁷⁰⁹ Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

⁷¹⁰ Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁷¹¹ Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

The communal aspect for OFWBs helps both members and pastors shift their perspective. It moves one from an inward perspective to an outward one.⁷¹² For many foot washing means “I’m not better than anyone than anyone else or I’m not as good as I think I might be. It keeps me in perspective, looking at myself in perspective.”⁷¹³ For these OFWBs, foot washing is a continual check against pride, selfishness, and individualism. OFWBs need foot washing in order to maintain a healthy Christian spirit of humility. Pastors repeatedly explain that it is necessary in order to understand humility. If OFWBs did not have foot washing, one pastor says, “I think that what would be missing without it is to bring me to that point of understanding humility. That it causes me to remember that every time I do it. If I fought with my brother and have not [repaired that relationship], it will remind me that I need to get that done.”⁷¹⁴ Foot washing’s transforming effects are found in the ways in continues to draw participants back again and again. It can create a longing and desire for the type of community that it presents. A member describes times that she has missed foot washing. She describes how, “There’s been times where the kids had school the next day, and service was running late, and so we skipped foot washing that night [the evening service]. I know that I missed something. A part of me still wanted to be there even though for whatever reason I couldn’t that time. I really did, I craved, wanted to be back there.”⁷¹⁵

Foot washing’s transforming effects can help prepare one for serving the outside world. It is a gradual process of molding one to engage the outer community and world.

⁷¹² A questionnaire respondent shares that foot washing, “keeps me closer to his example of serving and not thinking too much of myself.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (H), April 2014.

⁷¹³ Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁷¹⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (B), March 26, 2015.

⁷¹⁵ Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

One member explains, “I think it's all made me who I am today. I do... I go back to those stories, to those experiences. It's definitely a part of my life. I do know, and maybe the reverence side of it has made me appreciate, the part of serving more. I think that is one of my gifts maybe because I love doing things for other people. I love that.”⁷¹⁶ Another interviewee agrees with this sentiment stating, “I think that [foot washing] has changed my outlook on what I think our Free Will Baptist denomination can be in its local and in its community, wherever it can thrive.”⁷¹⁷ Foot washing creates a thankful and appreciative attitude among OFWB participants.⁷¹⁸ Thus it prepares one for future service and action. Looking back at his life, one interviewee believes that foot washing has “driven me to my knees more. It makes me appreciate more what Christ did for us. It also makes me thankful. It’s not something that I’m proud of. I’m just thankful and I think there’s a difference...It took me awhile to learn that.”⁷¹⁹ It is a process of learning, learning from foot washing and from others. One cannot expect to be immediately changed by foot washing. One OFWB says that foot washing is “a process of getting me to where I am today. It's taken all those people, it's taken all of that learning of service. It’s taken learning more about who Jesus is and what he did and how he taught the disciples. There are so many things that I look at differently, so much differently...I'm not the same person I was then.”⁷²⁰

Foot Washing and the Spiritual

⁷¹⁶ Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

⁷¹⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (J), February 26, 2015.

⁷¹⁸ A questionnaire respondent shares that foot washing “makes me consider how willing I am (or not) to accept help, encouragement from others.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (B), June 2014.

⁷¹⁹ Interview with OFWB member (C), June 30, 2015.

⁷²⁰ Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

Connection to Jesus

Foot washing is taken seriously because of its connection to Jesus. OFWBs see great value in reenacting something done and commanded by Jesus.⁷²¹ Practicing foot washing means that one is being obedient to Jesus's call. Jesus says to do foot washing, and it must therefore be done. When washing feet, OFWBs are trying to be faithful to scripture. Being very frank, one pastor declares, "It's certainly a direct initiative from the Lord himself. I think it connects us because he has asked us to do it. I'm being obedient to his call."⁷²²

OFWBs have a strong desire to obey Jesus and follow his example.⁷²³ Foot washing provides a physical tool for learning about Jesus and his message. More importantly, for OFWBs, foot washing is "an effort to be more like [Jesus]. Trying to be more like him in our daily walk and activities and the things that we do, keeping us cognizant of what he did for us and our salvation."⁷²⁴ Jesus sets the example, therefore for OFWBs, foot washing is "following the example of Christ."⁷²⁵ And by following the example we are to do likewise.⁷²⁶

Besides being an example, foot washing can be a command for some. Pastors and members point to the passage on foot washing as being a direct command of Jesus. For

⁷²¹ A questionnaire respondent explains this connection stating, "Knowing my Lord was humble enough to wash the Disciples feet and we should be humble in our daily life." Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (C), May 2014.

⁷²² Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015

⁷²³ A questionnaire respondent writes, "It is an honor and a privilege to follow Jesus in this remarkable act." Questionnaire response from OFWB, First FWB Smithfield, May 2014.

⁷²⁴ Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

⁷²⁵ Foot washing is a reminder of the personal and universal implications of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. A respondent writes that foot washing "brings remembrance of what Jesus did for mankind, for me personally. It gives me a closer feeling of Jesus' brotherhood." Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (E), September 2014.

⁷²⁶ Interview with OFWB pastor (K), February 12, 2015.

example, this pastor maintains that, “One of the direct commandments from the New Testament, in my opinion, is to go out and do [foot washing]. He didn’t say let’s just do it tonight. The way I read it, it was do it now.”⁷²⁷ This pastor clarifies that this command is for a purpose. Jesus commands foot washing with the hope that “it would help carry over more and to you helping [your] fellow man [or woman] outside the walls. To helping the poor and the sick and things like that because it puts you in that frame of mind.”⁷²⁸

OFWBs see foot washing as a way to learn about Jesus. One needs to experience foot washing in order to understand what Christ’s ministry was all about. Foot washing should never be done just for sake of doing it. OFWBs practice foot washing “so people can understand why you’re doing this and what the love of Christ done. Why he chose to give himself to us that he was willing to humble himself and wash his disciples feet. And he set that example for us to do.”⁷²⁹ The experience “connects you to him in that this is what he did and you know it’s not simple and easy...It can be humbling for us and we can relate to him in that way and what it means to be a servant.”⁷³⁰

Foot washing draws OFWB participants closer to Jesus. OFWBs are connecting to Jesus on historical, emotional, and spiritual levels. It draws them closer to their savior and helps them feel that they have done something important. One member shares, “I think that it makes you feel closer because you’re doing something you know he did. It just makes you feel closer to him. I think it also makes you feel that he’s pleased with what you’re doing. I think that would be a lot of it, the closeness. You’re pleasing because

⁷²⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), January 26, 2015.

⁷²⁸ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), January 26, 2015.

⁷²⁹ Interview with OFWB pastor (B), March 26, 2015.

⁷³⁰ Interview with OFWB member (G), January 29, 2015.

it goes back to the teaching part of what he was trying to teach his disciples. I think that maybe you feel like sometimes, maybe I got it.”⁷³¹

Foot washing is therefore a way to enter into the life and experience of Jesus.⁷³² For OFWBs, it makes Jesus feel real and tangible.⁷³³ Jesus and his ministry becomes accessible to everyone. Foot washing thus establishes a connection between Christ and everyday life for OFWBs.⁷³⁴ When one is drawn closer to Christ it inevitably draws one to others. OFWBs do foot washing because “it's a reminder to them that Jesus was one of us, and that he cared enough for his disciples, and we are his modern day disciples that he would have stooped down to wash their feet. So I think it's a way of us connecting with that New Testament story. Remembering that Jesus wasn't just some superhero type person. He was truly human.”⁷³⁵ Following this realization, foot washing puts Jesus in a different light. OFWBs are able to see “what Christ really did, how he served not just ones he loved and that loved him, but how he served those that hated him anyway but he still did it and he did it lovingly. When I think about that, and I try to make myself...remind myself of that intentionally every time when I'm doing foot washing.”⁷³⁶

Foot washing's connection to Jesus reinforces the idea among OFWBs that they are to be a servant. A pastor suggests, “If our Lord came to be a servant, who do we think

⁷³¹ Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

⁷³² When practicing foot washing, a questionnaire respondent writes, “I feel like it is a wonderful way to express love for Jesus and of Jesus to try [to] walk in his ways.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (G), May 2014.

⁷³³ Expressing this tangible connection, a questionnaire respondent writes that when washing feet, “I feel like I am following one of His examples and that makes me feel closer to Him.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (E), September 2014.

⁷³⁴ Foot washing, a questionnaire respondent writes, “reminds me of Christ's true nature, which is that of a servant, which is what I should be.” Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (E), September 2014.

⁷³⁵ Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

⁷³⁶ Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

we are if we're not following that example? There again the practice itself reinforces the behavior of what it means to be a part of the Christian community."⁷³⁷ As a Christian community, OFWBs seek to establish their communities in the image of Jesus.

Individuals bring Jesus to one another every time foot washing takes place. It is a way of reminding one another that Jesus lives in each person. When one kneels and washes another person's feet, it is as if one is washing the feet of Jesus. Therefore, "Christ says I was hungry and you feed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was homeless, jobless, I think what we do for others and do unto others [is] what Christ Himself ultimately [does] to that person...In fact, I think it connects the person to Christ because it is Christ that is doing the kneeling and the washing."⁷³⁸

Connection to the Holy Spirit

Foot washing can also be a spiritual experience for OFWBs. While OFWBs typically think of Jesus in connection with foot washing, many acknowledge that the Holy Spirit has an important role to play. The intimate setting, fellowship, and prayer work together to create an experience that invites the Holy Spirit. On one level, the Holy Spirit connects OFWB participants with Jesus.⁷³⁹ During foot washing, it is the Holy Spirit that "teaches us how to grow in Christ, and I think the experience of washing feet too is an experience of growing in Christ and growing in love for your fellow believers. It teaches us how we love unconditionally."⁷⁴⁰

⁷³⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁷³⁸ Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁷³⁹ A questionnaire respondent describes the presence of Jesus during foot washing. She believes that when, "[g]irding myself with the towel and getting down to humble myself to wash my sister's feet. There is a closeness among us, we can all feel Jesus near. I feel His Spirit near." Questionnaire response from OFWB, Church (G), May 2014.

⁷⁴⁰ Interview with OFWB pastor (I), February 2, 2015.

While the Holy Spirit can help OFWBs grow in Christ, OFWBs believe that the Holy Spirit adds a unique feeling to the experience. Some see the Holy Spirit has having a major role in foot washing. One member believes that the Holy Spirit is “very involved. That’s part of the beauty of it. Those that do participate...do it through the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit humbles us and it’s certainly a big component of foot washing.”⁷⁴¹ She goes on to describe foot washing as a “spiritual cleansing.” This cleansing, she describes, is the work of the Holy Spirit “cleansing our hearts and minds and consciences. Which is liberating knowing that through Christ’s example we can [be cleansed], it makes it more real, makes it more tangible for us.”⁷⁴²

The close intimate gathering of foot washing provides a spiritual opportunity for OFWBs. It is an opportunity to do something one does not normally do. In that small room, OFWBs are drawn into an experience not found in any of their other services. One pastor explains, “We are doing something that we do not normally do, that it’s somewhat of an anomaly to anything we might do in life.”⁷⁴³ He continues stating, “Of the three ordinances that we have, it’s the only one that to me brings us together in a room quietly doing things that we do not normally do because the Lord said do it. To me, it’s probably the most Spirit-filled thing we do.”⁷⁴⁴

Through the Holy Spirit, OFWB participants are brought closer to each and to God. The Holy Spirit becomes a part of foot washing. However, the Holy Spirit is not in the things used. The Holy Spirit, for OFWBs, is not tied to the pails or the towels. The space used is neither holy nor unique. OFWBs experience the Holy Spirit through one

⁷⁴¹ Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

⁷⁴² Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

⁷⁴³ Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁷⁴⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

another. The atmosphere of foot washing heightens a presence already there but not normally felt. A member explains, “I think it’s just a time of feeling closer than during ordinary time, which it shouldn’t be probably. I think it’s the atmosphere, I think it’s something that permeates everything at that particular time that just makes it, makes you feel closer.”⁷⁴⁵ The Holy Spirit, a pastor claims, is “totally involved. It’s hard for me to sit here and say that anybody partaking of the washing of the saints’ feet cannot be wrapped in the Holy Spirit. Because that’s too close to you, that’s too close to each other.”⁷⁴⁶

Foot washing invokes a spiritual sense of closeness to one’s fellow believers. OFWBs see this as evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. OFWBs also find evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence in prayer and singing. A member explains that since it is a “smaller more intimated group of very like-minded believers, you really do feel [the Holy Spirit’s] presence there...I have just felt [the Holy Spirit’s] presence there so heavy where the times when you heard those speak you really didn’t know they could speak. They’ve never spoken in church before. When he’s involved those have been the very best times.”⁷⁴⁷ At the movement of the Holy Spirit, “that’s when the singing breaks out or that’s when a person is prompted to tell about something going on in their life.”⁷⁴⁸ One OFWB pastor describes this as a “stirring” experience. He describes how the Holy Spirit motivates one to change one’s behavior. The Holy Spirit is moving one to take action, both during that moment and afterwards. He claims, “When you think of the Holy Spirit being there and being involved, it that comes from...thinking about the

⁷⁴⁵ Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

⁷⁴⁶ Focus group (A) interview with OFWB pastor, June 28, 2015.

⁷⁴⁷ Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

⁷⁴⁸ Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

atmosphere, the silence. Sometimes just biblical conversation and sometimes the singing. I think the Holy Spirit is stirring hearts to move in that direction instead of us just saying ‘okay this is what we want to do.’”⁷⁴⁹ Through foot washing, the Holy Spirit shows how one is to live. The Holy Spirit “speaks to you, that this is what you’re expected to do in your Christian life, not to just wash feet but to go out and help other people. It’s a teaching experience.”⁷⁵⁰ It is an experience that “is incredible real and present and here. Your feet are dirty and I’m bowing down in front you to wash your feet...washing the saints’ feet cannot get any more real, cannot be anymore present and here and now.”⁷⁵¹

Discordant Voices of Foot Washing

Not all OFWB practice foot washing. Many OFWBs do not participate in foot washing regularly. There are some OFWBs who have never experienced foot washing. Despite its importance within the denomination’s history, foot washing can be a fringe practice. Pastors and member are concerned by poor attendance and a lack of younger participants. Even within the OFWB, foot washing’s participants are desperately trying to keep the practice alive. Foot washing has a dedicated core group of participants. They believe in the practice of foot washing, but this conviction has not translated into large groups of participants. The OFWB story of this practice is also one of frustration and disappointment. The future of foot washing within the OFWB has yet to be determined.

Pastors and members both acknowledge that participation is a problem. A member shares, “It’s one of our most poorly attended services. We try to get attendance, but it is, every time, one of our most poorly attended services.”⁷⁵² One member estimates,

⁷⁴⁹ Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁷⁵⁰ Interview with OFWB member (H), January 26, 2015.

⁷⁵¹ Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁷⁵² Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

“I don’t have a percentage, but in our church I would say ten percent of the population wash feet, ten to fifteen percent. That’s the lowest attended service that we have. And from what I understand, it’s low in a lot of other churches too, but I can’t measure other churches. I know in ours it is.”⁷⁵³ Another pastor shares that participants of foot washing are low. He estimates that “about twenty-five percent participate and seventy-five percent don’t.”⁷⁵⁴ A children’s minister also describes low numbers of participations. She says, “We run like 150 on Sunday morning and we might have thirty-five at a business meeting. Of those thirty-five we typically have anywhere from three to five women who participate in the foot washing. We may have ten men that participate.”⁷⁵⁵

Foot washing can carry a stigma for some. It becomes something to avoid.⁷⁵⁶ It is not unusual to see people “shy away from it. Especially people who did not grow up Free Will Baptist...When you say you’re going to have a feet washing service, your numbers are not going to be as large as you would on a normal Sunday night.”⁷⁵⁷ Those who are available to wash feet do not always participate. Because communion and foot washing can occur during the same service, many “come and stay in the sanctuary and just don’t go to the rooms to wash feet...it just sounds strange to them so they don’t participate.”⁷⁵⁸ Even those who do participate in foot washing acknowledge that it does always not hold the same importance that baptism and communion have.⁷⁵⁹

⁷⁵³ Interview with OFWB member (H), January 26, 2015.

⁷⁵⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁷⁵⁵ Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

⁷⁵⁶ A members expresses concern that, “At our church, some people avoid it on purpose. Some people just don’t see the importance in it.” Interview with OFWB member (F), March 17, 2015.

⁷⁵⁷ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁷⁵⁸ Interview with OFWB member (G), January 29, 2015.

⁷⁵⁹ A member explains how “if you compare it to services even here [his church], there’s reverence and a time for reflection and all that stuff. When we go over to the fellowship hall, a lot of times that’s what

Participants are usually older adults or elderly. Foot washing does not usually attract youth. Despite education, “the younger folks are chickened out by [foot washing],”⁷⁶⁰ therefore, the “older people [wash] more than other people these days.”⁷⁶¹ In many OFWB churches, foot washing has acquired an identity as a practice or event for the old and elderly. Pastors have difficult time getting younger people involved in the practice. For older adults, a pastor explains, it is “something that we’ve done all of our life. It’s part of who we are.”⁷⁶² Unfortunately, younger members may not share this identity, “Some of the younger folks of today just don’t see any need of it so therefore there’s not very much participation.”⁷⁶³

OFWB pastors and members cite several reasons for their perception of foot washing’s decline. Some believe that new members, who did not grow up as OFWB, do not carry on the practice.⁷⁶⁴ Others argue that touching another person’s feet is a barrier many will not cross.⁷⁶⁵ Some may see it as forced on the laity, thus causing foot washing to lose its meaning.⁷⁶⁶ For these reasons, it is not unusual for there to be OFWBs “that

we feel like, it’s just to go ahead and get it over...in our church it lacks the gravitas that you have here while we do communion.” Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁷⁶⁰ Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁷⁶¹ Interview with OFWB member (G), January 29, 2015.

⁷⁶² Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁷⁶³ Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁷⁶⁴ A member describes how “we knew everybody at church and all their family and family history, and they had always grown up in that church. And now as going to college is more prevalent, people move away and others move in, we’ve had more people come into the church with no experience of being FWB before. A lot of times they are more reluctant. Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

⁷⁶⁵ A pastor says, “I think it’s just the opposition of touching somebody else’s feet. You know most people have a little issue with that.” Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁷⁶⁶ He explains that “years and years ago it was one of those things that you had to do. I think that took some of the emphasis, the meaning away from it.” Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

have never washed anyone's feet that's [sic] been a Free Will Baptist for many, many years. Some people just won't do it."⁷⁶⁷

Members give several reasons for not doing it. Talking about his reasons for never doing foot washing, a member describes how his experiences of the practice have always been negative. He is not against foot washing, but does have a problem with the participant's behavior, "I didn't see a reverence to it. I didn't see a seriousness to it. It was just like this is something we do. I'm not keen on 'this is just something we do.' There has to be a purpose...I didn't see what I thought was anything that really I thought was extremely meaningful."⁷⁶⁸ He still refuses to do foot washing, citing that "I've had no burning desire to go back. I guess that makes me not a real good Free Will Baptist but, I'm not too concerned about it really."⁷⁶⁹ He does acknowledge that his primary problem was with the people rather than the practice itself. He admits that things may be different if he tried it again.⁷⁷⁰ Though he may try it again in the future,⁷⁷¹ he has a problem with foot washing being part of the OFWB identity. He is not sure what foot washing says about the denomination.⁷⁷²

Others object to the practice itself. A deacon describes how foot washing is now outdated. It no longer has any relevance because it lacks any connection with

⁷⁶⁷ Interview with OFWB member (H), January 26, 2015.

⁷⁶⁸ Interview with OFWB member (E), January 27, 2015.

⁷⁶⁹ Interview with OFWB member (E), January 27, 2015.

⁷⁷⁰ Speaking of his first experiences of foot washing, he shares that there "was a group of people who were all friends. They knew each other well...There may have been a little more comfortable familiarity that existed that may not exist now if I went to another service because of the demographic of the church. I don't have problems with the concept." Interview with OFWB member (E), January 27, 2015.

⁷⁷¹ He shares, "I think we're doing a good job of having a reverent communion in our church and most churches I've been in. We're successful in making that a reverent service. If we could upgrade foot washing to that level, maybe I'd be okay with it." Interview with OFWB member (E), January 27, 2015.

⁷⁷² Foot washing, according to this member, "almost seems to be a trademark for us. I'm not sure that the people outside the denomination see that...I'm not sure what perception that gives of us in this day and age." Interview with OFWB member (E), January 27, 2015.

contemporary life. For him it has nothing to do with the aspect of touching feet, instead foot washing is “a practice that is so unnatural to our society. I guess that’s just where I lose it.”⁷⁷³ Foot washing is “busywork”⁷⁷⁴ that distracts from actual service projects.⁷⁷⁵ It reflects the time of Christ when everyone “would’ve been familiar with what he [Jesus] was doing and why. Today nobody does that [foot washing]. It’s no longer the lowest position. We do it because we read about it in his word and Christ did it. Some people take that as a command and I understand that. But I think that, I just don’t think that it still applies today.”⁷⁷⁶ Therefore, members acknowledge that foot washing can become “very ritualistic...it’s programmed in a way. A lot of times we don’t consciously think about why you’re doing it.”⁷⁷⁷ A final objection is from those who work in healthcare and regularly wash bodies. For them, they say foot washing just feels like what they during the work week.⁷⁷⁸

We are a People of the Basin and the Towel:⁷⁷⁹ OFWB Identity

⁷⁷³ Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁷⁷⁴ Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁷⁷⁵ This member explains, “We do a ton of projects here over the years that are hands on, everybody working together doing something for somebody, serving in any way we can. [We] have food drives, we do all kinds of stuff all year long. I love that stuff. I always want to be a part of everything like that. To me all of that has a tangible point. Maybe that’s where I miss it in foot washing. I’m not saying I’m right and everybody stop doing foot washing. To me that’s where I lose foot washing. To me it’s just, there’s no tangible end to it. I haven’t helped anybody when I do that. Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁷⁷⁶ Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁷⁷⁷ Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁷⁷⁸ A member says, “I worked in a nursing home most of my life. To me it was like...you were a person who worked on a computer day in and day, the last thing you want to do is go home and get one a computer. In the same sense for almost fifteen years of my life I worked a nursing home and I bathe people, washed their feet, washed their back, washed their hair, I mean I covered it all. To me I just can’t get the true meaning out of it [foot washing].” Focus group (B) interview with OFWB member, June 28, 2015.

⁷⁷⁹ A prominent pastor and OFWB educator says, “A common phrase that I will use is we should never forget that ‘we are a people of the basin and the towel.’ I haven’t listened to enough preaching over the past twenty years to know if that is a refrain of my brother and sister ministers. I sure hope that it would be because I think it’s vitally important.” Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

Despite non-universal participation, foot washing remains at the core of the OFWB identity. It is a reminder of who they are. It reminds OFWBs of their call to service, servant leadership, and love for all people. Foot washing “identifies who we are. We are servants of the Lord, that’s what that towel and basin mean. It’s servant-hood, serving others and that we ought to be more like Jesus in doing that. It’s a vibrant part of us as a denomination. To me it is a major part of who I am as an OFWB.”⁷⁸⁰ OFWBs who practice foot washing want to see it remain that way. They want to be known as people who wash feet, not for the sake of foot washing itself, but what it says about who they are “as a church, as a believer, and as a people.”⁷⁸¹

Foot washing is a continuation of the OFWB story. It is “one of the things that designates all people who are part of the Free Will Baptist church, from other Christian faith traditions.”⁷⁸² OFWBs have a unique story, experience, and tradition worth sharing with others. Their practice of foot washing is a difference that “makes us unique. I don’t think it’s [foot washing] something to hide from or think we’re wrong or think that we should change because everybody else isn’t doing it.”⁷⁸³ It is part of the OFWB history and heritage, and for that reason alone should not be abandoned. Foot washing is, they argue, “something that we should share and not try to go away from. I think we’re trying to go away from it just to try to go along with everyone else, to fit in better. We would rather [sometimes] do away with some of our real heritage [like foot washing]. It really

⁷⁸⁰ Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

⁷⁸¹ The full quote from the pastor reads, “I think that we need to bring [foot washing] back to where it belongs...event though that’s not always done in our church, we should be trying to bring that to our people. Why do I say that? It’s because that’s who we are, that’s what makes us who we are as a church, as a believer, and as a people.” Interview with OFWB pastor (B), March 26, 2015.

⁷⁸² Interview with OFWB pastor (J), February 26, 2015.

⁷⁸³ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

makes us unique and I hope that doesn't happen."⁷⁸⁴ Foot washing defines their OFWB experience. Without it, their heritage would be in question.⁷⁸⁵

Foot washing is bigger than the OFWB heritage. It is part of the larger Christian story of redemption, hope, and love. OFWBs are but one small part of this universal story. Their practice of foot washing is a reminder of that story, and therefore part of the renewal of the world. This renewal begins in Jesus Christ and continues through the Christian story today. As a pastor describes it, "I think he's going to renew it [the world]. I think Christ started the process of renewing it and he wants us to join him in it...what more beautiful metaphor of that is there than the servitude of bowing at a brother or sister's feet and saying 'I love you in Christ and it's my privilege to serve you by washing feet.'"⁷⁸⁶ OFWBs are continuing that story of renewal. Foot washing is a call to live as a servant. OFWB theologian and educator David Hines writes,

Christians are a community of the forgiven, of persons who have had their personal stories rewritten according to the story of Jesus. Christians make this story tangible through their symbols: the cross and the sacraments. This collective memory and re-presentation has the power to produce a distinctive way of living. In Baptism we have a new start. In Eucharist we remember how we came to be. Then in the Washing of the Saints' Feet we learn how we are called to live.⁷⁸⁷

⁷⁸⁴ Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁷⁸⁵ Speaking of the OFWB logo, a concerned pastor shares, "I think if we're not [doing foot washing] we might as well just go ahead and redo our emblem, the whole nine. If we're not going to practice what Jesus said to do, might as well get rid of the whole emblem. The towel and the basin, get rid of it all. And then what leg do we have to stand on? That [foot washing] is what defines us as OFWB." Focus group (A) interview with OFWB pastor, June 28, 2015.

⁷⁸⁶ Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁷⁸⁷ David Hines, "Tell Me the Story So That I Can Live the Story." Presentation, Mid-Year Spiritual Banquet OFWB Ministerial Association, University of Mount Olive, April 1, 2005.

Chapter Five: Relation and Space: Story and Action

*Truly to study a thing means evoking step by step the sense of all other things
and of their solidarity – mingling in the concert of all being,
entering into union with the universe and with oneself.*⁷⁸⁸

The Story Carries On

The event speaks and the story is heard. Moving forward, the story is not left behind. The story carries on. Its message lingers long after the story speaks. Although the OFWB are small, theirs is a living story. Their story is renewed at every practice of foot washing. The OFWB message is told generation after generation. Their ending has yet to be told, and will surely not end with OFWBs. The story is much bigger than that. The message is neither self-contained nor esoteric. The OFWB experience connects with the wider human experience. The OFWB story speaks to what it means to be human. Through experience and action, OFWBs share their story for the world. This story is tied to the life and experience of Jesus Christ. Conversing with this story only requires an attentive ear and open heart.

Going deeper into a world of ritual action, time needs to be given to engage this story. As one enters this world, the goal is not to possess or change it. It is not an object of academic curiosity. Shifting from analysis to understanding allows one to understand how this story speaks today. One reads the story in order to amplify its voice, not to change or misrepresent the story. It is a process of expanding the story's reach and putting it into contact with new modes of expression. It especially reaches those expressions that may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar. Story removes the limitations

⁷⁸⁸ A.G. Sertillanges, OP, *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods*, trans. Mary Ryan (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 137

placed on ritual action. It removes the limitations that determine the places and situations where ritual action is relevant or has a voice. Ritual action should have no predetermined limits. Once limits are removed, ritual action's voice goes beyond theory and into new territory. In this case, the new territory explores the relationship between foot washing and postmodern voices.

The OFWB foot washing experience offers an opportunity to expand the voice and reach of ritual action. When ritual action interacts with new voices, the readings of these experiences are enhanced. Ritual action is better able to speak to new contemporary situations. Building from the OFWB narrative, one can see how OFWB foot washing experiences speaks to relationship, the social, and the everyday. The OFWB voice goes beyond the religious and theological, not to leave them behind, but to expand them. By reading and expanding the OFWB voice, their religious and theological concerns are expanded and translated.

Relationship: Being-With

The OFWB experience of foot washing points to a shared meaning as opposed to individual meaning. Meaning is rooted in the experiences shared among individuals. During foot washing, OFWBs enact what Jean-Luc Nancy calls being-with. This is the idea that meaning does not begin at that individual level, instead it is shared between individuals and groups.⁷⁸⁹ Being, in the singular, points to no one other than the self. Meaning has no reach beyond the individual. In being-singular, meaning lacks the ability

⁷⁸⁹ Nancy writes, "There is no meaning if meaning is not shared, and not because there would be an ultimate or first signification that all beings have in common, but because meaning is itself the sharing of Being." Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 2. Meaning is not tied to an ultimate signifier, instead meaning is generated through shared experience.

to connect. It ends at the individual perspective. Nancy maintains that meaning involves someone other than oneself. Meaning is a dynamic process circulating between persons.⁷⁹⁰

Meaning opens in the space between people.⁷⁹¹ It is a matter of contact and reaching out within the space. This space is neither a bridge nor a vacuum. It is a place of action and connection. It is a state of coming into contact with the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others. It is not an empty space, rather it is as Nancy suggests, “The heart of a connection, the *interlacing* of whose extremities remain separate even at the very center of the knot.”⁷⁹² At the heart of connection are individuals reaching out to one another. It is a crossing of separate but connected individuals. As individuals reach out, the between stretches towards the two.⁷⁹³ Here being-singular becomes being-with. Being realizes its true existence in the space, and existence lives in “an affirmation of the world.”⁷⁹⁴ It is taking refuge in being and entering into a state of contact between one another.⁷⁹⁵

Existence is contact between people, therefore meaning lives in the giving and receiving between individuals. It circulates back and forth through a mutual sharing.⁷⁹⁶ This circulation of meaning cannot be willed or controlled. It happens between all things

⁷⁹⁰ Nancy says, “Being itself, the phenomenon of Being, is meaning that is, in turn, its own circulation – and we are this circulation.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 2.

⁷⁹¹ That is everything, as Nancy puts it, “passes *between us*.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 3.

⁷⁹² Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 5.

⁷⁹³ Or as Nancy puts it, “The ‘between’ is the stretching out and distance opened by the singular as such, as its spacing of meaning.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 5.

⁷⁹⁴ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 9.

⁷⁹⁵ Nancy writes that meaning, “is a matter of one or the other, one and the other, one with the other.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 5-6.

⁷⁹⁶ Circulation is the origin of meaning. Nancy explains that “there is no other meaning than the meaning of circulation.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 3.

and moves in all directions.⁷⁹⁷ Circulation is a process of contact. It reflects that existence is a matter of being-with instead of being-singular.⁷⁹⁸ Being needs to be being-with.⁷⁹⁹ Being-with reflects that meaning circulates. There is no control of meaning from the perspective of an I. Existence lives in the circulation between the I and the other. Breaking that connection is tantamount to breaking life itself.

Being depends on being for existence. Being-singular represents a rejection of the other. Being-singular points to the self as its own origin. Thus what occurs outside the self becomes secondary or accidental. Being suffers under the illusion as being its own creator.⁸⁰⁰ As Nancy says, the “plurality of beings is at the foundation of Being.”⁸⁰¹ Plurality points to a fundamental shift in how one views the self in relation to others. A single self, being, does not represent being to its fullest extent. Alone, being is a static concept. Being represents a state or a quality, where it should be an action,⁸⁰² or a becoming. Being is unfinished within itself. Being needs to relate with being in order to change and grow. Relationship is at the heart of what it means to be human. Being is existence, yes, but existence for and with others.⁸⁰³

⁷⁹⁷ Circulation, Nancy describes, “Goes in all directions at once, in all directions of all the space-times opened by presence to presence.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 3.

⁷⁹⁸ According to Nancy, “Existence is *with*: otherwise nothing exists.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 4.

⁷⁹⁹ Nancy expresses this as, “Being cannot be anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 3.

⁸⁰⁰ The being would be its own creator. Nancy claims that a “single being is a contradiction in terms. Such a being, which would be its own foundation, origin, and intimacy, would be incapable of Being.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 12.

⁸⁰¹ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 12.

⁸⁰² Nancy explains that being “is neither a state nor a quality, but rather the action according to which what Kant calls ‘the [mere] positing of a thing’ takes place (‘is’).” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 12.

⁸⁰³ Or as Nancy puts it, “Being is given as existence, being-in-oneself-outside-oneself, which we make explicit, we ‘humans,’ but which we make explicit, as I have said, *for* the totality of beings.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 12.

Being connects-to-being, being lives in connection with being. The static gives way to the dynamic. Others are necessary for the existence being. To understand one's own being or existence, being reaches out to being. One embraces the plurality of being. The origin of one's existence does not being with the I, but with the other.⁸⁰⁴ At every moment, existence lives in connection. Thus to have being, is to be in the world.⁸⁰⁵ As such, one lives in this world in order to live for the other. Being never lives for the self.⁸⁰⁶ Being is shared, it plays between one and the other. In the in-between, being plays.⁸⁰⁷ Being plays in this space in order to understand one another. Without this play, this interaction, being has no understanding. It only sees the reflection of the self.⁸⁰⁸ One cannot understand being until one understands that, as Nancy writes, that "Being is communication."⁸⁰⁹

We Are What We Do⁸¹⁰

⁸⁰⁴ For example, Nancy writes, "It is the plural singularity of the Being of being. We reach it to the extent that we are in touch with *ourselves* and in touch with the rest of beings." Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 13.

⁸⁰⁵ To be human is to be "in the world insofar as the world is its own exteriority, the proper state of its being-out-in-the-world." Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 18.

⁸⁰⁶ Being is always for the other. It is not "for just one, but always for one another, always between one another... 'one' or 'it' is never other than *we*." *Being Singular Plural*, 27.

⁸⁰⁷ "Being is put into play among us; it does not have any other meaning except the dis-position of this 'between.' *Being Singular Plural*, 27.

⁸⁰⁸ "The understanding of Being is nothing other than an understanding of others, which means, in every sense, understanding others through 'me' and understanding 'me' through others, the understanding of one another." *Being Singular Plural*, 27-29.

⁸⁰⁹ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 28.

⁸¹⁰ In what follows, in this and subsequent chapters, general, all-encompassing language will be generally used to describe OFWBs and their perspectives on foot washing. Of course the OFWB perspective is more nuanced and diverse. Not all OFWBs value foot washing. There are a variety of views regarding the necessity, meaning, and importance of foot washing even among the OFWB. Yet for the clarity of argument, and to avoid complicated linguistic gymnastics, a more unified and direct approach is employed. This direct approach reflects the data gained (see chapter four) from questionnaires, interviews, and participant observation. Thus this portrayal represents a snapshot of the OFWB experience. However, this snapshot attempts as faithful representation of the OFWB experience as is possible.

When OFWBs practice foot washing, there is no mention of being, circulation, or plurality. No reasons are given as to the necessity of being-with. There are no reflections of any kind on how their actions create meaning. Something more important is happening when this ritual action is practiced. OFWBs live the idea before the idea has been formulated. Action comes before the knowing.⁸¹¹ OFWBs do not need to be told about being-with. Through foot washing, they know it and live it.⁸¹² Every time foot washing is practiced, these concepts are physically enacted. Words are not necessary for doing or even understanding the experience.

The experience speaks for itself. Foot washing drives OFWB tradition and behavior. It is a habitual action, serving as a basis for Christian formation. Thus foot washing shapes behavior because it is done rather than taught.⁸¹³ It privileges action over doctrine, standing in contrast to a Christianity that privileges thought over action.⁸¹⁴ As OFWBs practice foot washing, they privilege action over thought. The action teaches and shows them how to live. It helps to shift OFWBs focus toward others, helping them to

⁸¹¹ Sue Patterson describes how Wittgenstein “maintains that acting accordance with a rule is prior to the explicit articulation of or comprehension of the rule. We can play the game in accordance with the rules without ever knowing that it has particular rules. The game *is* its rules; the rules are enacted, lived.” Sue Patterson, *Word, Words and World* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2013), 37.

⁸¹² Patterson says that “conceptual knowledge (‘knowing-that’) takes the form of new propositions, concepts or categories whereas a gain to tacit or pre-conceptual knowledge (‘knowing how’) occurs through activities or practices.” Patterson, *Word, Words, and World*, 51. OFWBs fall into the latter category. They just know how. It does not need to be explained to them.

⁸¹³ Smith writes, “The driving center of human action and behavior is a nexus of loves, longings, and habits that hums along under the hood, so to speak, without needing to be thought about. These loves, longings, and habits orient and propel our being-in-the-world. The focus on formation is holistic because its end is Christian *action*.” James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 12.

⁸¹⁴ Because of modernity, Smith thinks “many models of Christian higher education (and many accounts of discipleship) are fixated on epistemic matters. Seeing Christianity as primarily a set of doctrines, beliefs, and ideas, they implicitly and functionally reduce Christian education to the acquisition of knowledge.” Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 12.

show intimacy, forgive, and acceptance for one another. This ritual action teaches through the heart rather than the head.

OFWB's being-in-the-world is shaped by foot washing. OFWBs are actors who teach and learn through ritual action.⁸¹⁵ As actors, they allow action to influence the way they live and view their world. For OFWBs, action comes before reflection. Foot washing represents how they are called to live. Their response is to do first and reflect later. It is not that the intellectual is unimportant, they express the intellect through what they do. Foot washing is who they are.⁸¹⁶ Foot washing represents how OFWBs are driven by what they love.⁸¹⁷

OFWBs demonstrate that action can come before thought. Pastors educate their congregations on the practice, but education is by no means uniform. Some education can come from sermons, however the primary way of learning is observing and participating. To learn foot washing, OFWBs have to do it. The action determines the rule.⁸¹⁸ What they do is an outcome of what they do.⁸¹⁹ Thus, OFWBs educate for action through

⁸¹⁵ "I think it's incumbent upon me as a pastor and a teacher to use [foot washing], this is a teachable moment. I'm utterly convinced that the only thing that brings us joy this side of heaven is that which we do to enrich the lives of others. This gives me a very concrete way of illustrating that, what it means, what it looks like." Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁸¹⁶ Smith explains that "those Christian communities we usually criticize for their anti-intellectualism are, in fact, intellectualist in their implicit philosophies of action insofar as they believe that changing what we *think* will change what we do. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 32.

⁸¹⁷ Action as a way of Christian knowledge is Smith's argument. As he puts it, "But what if we are actors before we are thinkers? What if action is driven and generated less by what we think and more by what we love?" Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 33.

⁸¹⁸ Wittgenstein considers this in the case of a road sign. He writes, "I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it. But that is only to give a causal connexion; to tell how it has come about that we now go by the sign-post; not what this going-by-the sign really consists in. On the contrary; I have further indicated that a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 80.

⁸¹⁹ Smith is "pushing back against an 'intellectualist' account of action that assumes that what I *do* is the outcome of what I *think*." Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 33.

action. They see that the best way to learn about Jesus is to do what he did. By reenacting his actions, OFWBs expect to learn to follow the example of Jesus.⁸²⁰

Foot washing teaches OFWBs to see, act, and live in the world. Seeing the world comes from acting in the world. One's actions determine the proper way to interpret it. Action guides encounter.⁸²¹ It trains one on how to respond and behave towards others. For OFWBs, foot washing trains them for encountering the other. Foot washing's concepts, such as humility, service, and forgiveness, guide their dealing with others.⁸²² In using pairs, foot washing reminds OFWBs that their actions affect others. Their actions teach them that being is being-with. What they *do* is who they *are*.

OFWBs and Being-With

OFWB foot washing is a living philosophy of being-with. This living philosophy is taught through action and applied through action. Thus, OFWBs understand the world through action involving being-with others through humility, love, and forgiveness. Foot washing is this visible action of being-with.⁸²³ It acts out the idea that existence means

⁸²⁰ Smith believes that intellectualism can "lead us to misunderstand the nature of action, including ethical action. We tend to assume that 'education for action' requires first uploading the relevant rules and axioms into our minds, then equipping agents with the critical thinking skills that will allow them to amass the relevant facts of a situation then make the right decision." Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 34.

⁸²¹ Seeing the world is dependent on how one acts in the world. Smith writes, "I'm not only primed to *see* the situation in a certain way...I'm also already inclined or disposed to *act* in a certain way – not as the result of a decision, but as a sort of 'natural' tendency given the inclinations that I've acquired, the habits that already prime me to 'lean' in certain directions." Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 36.

⁸²² Foot washing is used to teach service. A pastor explains how he does this by stating, "I think it sets a great example of what the Lord has asked us to be as servants. We talk about that a lot. We practice this at different things, the ordination of deacons and that sort of thing. I wash the deacons feet and his wife's feet. And we talk about why we do that. We taught to service, as Christians we are called to service." Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁸²³ Foot washing brings OFWBs closer together. It is their way of expressing being-with. A layperson reflects, "[Foot washing] definitely draws you closer. We have members who are, of course like ever church you only see them on Sunday mornings. We have those that are there for every service but may not participate in foot washing. But those that do participate there is a different type of closeness there. It's on another level. They are even more family. I guess it would be more akin to it being your immediate family versus your extended second third cousin, great aunt kind of. It's a much, much tighter bond." Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

contact. Christian action becomes bodily action. Bodily action is a physical reaching out within space. This action is a reminder that the body is inescapable. There is no place outside the body. More importantly, there is no place outside bodies.⁸²⁴

Any meaning circulates through the body, with the body, and towards other bodies. When OFWBs practice foot washing, the body is inescapable. This action is impossible with one body alone. In order to do it, one body has to touch another body. At its core, foot washing is a being-with instead of being-singular. Its existence, as an action, is dependent on a plurality of being. Its meaning comes from relationship. If one experiences humility, of oneself or another, the meaning is shared. No one can claim sole ownership of the meaning. Foot washing is a mutual sharing of meaning circulating between the giver and receiver, the I and the other. Neither the giver nor receiver control the action. It is a mutual giving and sharing. Both parties remain open to one other. This openness allows the experience of shared existence and meaning.⁸²⁵

In foot washing, the water is, literally and figuratively, this space of connection. Everything that occurs passes through this space. In this water are two bodies come together and sharing experience.⁸²⁶ The water is a joined space of creation, in that creation occurs because “[e]xistence is creation.”⁸²⁷ If being is being-with, then existence

⁸²⁴ Speaking of the body, Athena Athanasiou makes the case that “the human has no ‘proper’ place to take outside social situatedness and allocation, including the exposure to the possibility of being undone. The human is always the event of multiple exposures.” Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 32.

⁸²⁵ Judith Butler writes, “If the body opens [one] toward a ‘you,’ it opens [one] in such a way that the other, through bodily means, becomes capable of addressing a ‘you’ as well. Implicit in both modes of address is the understanding of the body, through its touch, securing the open address not just of this other whom I touch, but of every other body.” Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 81.

⁸²⁶ A pastor claims, “I think it brings us all together in a real sense of unity.” Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁸²⁷ Nancy’s full quote reads, “Existence is creation, *our* creation; it is the beginning and end that *we* are. This is the thought that is the most necessary for us to think. If we do not succeed in thinking it,

is shared. The water is the origin of a new creation, existence, between the giver and receiver.⁸²⁸ In that water, the other matters. Each existence matters to the other, because each existence is connected to the other. When OFWBs say that foot washing is an opportunity to show humility, love, service, and forgiveness, they are staying that the other matters. Their existence is tied to the other's existence. Foot washing is an opportunity to create something new. It is a chance to create a new relationships and experiences.⁸²⁹ Foot washing demonstrates that OFWB existence is a being-with. Each person lives in relationship with Jesus and each other. Their existence is immersed in the existence of others.⁸³⁰

Being Singular Plural: The "With" of Being

Foot washing, for OFWBs, suggests a shared existence. Being, individual existence, is not on its own. Being-singular is not an absolute existence, nor is being total and complete. The world has a bearing on who or what one is. Being-singular is existence for the self.

The OFWB practice of foot washing suggests a different view of the self. Foot washing opens the self towards others, instead of viewing oneself as enclosed. It suggests

then we will never gain access to who we are, we who are no more than us in a world, which is itself no more than the world [italics in the original]." Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 17.

⁸²⁸ Nancy writes that creation "signifies precisely that there is no Other and that the 'there is' is not an Other. Being is not the Other and that the 'there is' is not an Other. Being is not the Other, but the origin is the punctual and discrete spacing between us, as between us and the rest of the world, as between all beings." Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 19.

⁸²⁹ Speaking of foot washing's effects a pastors recalls, "[After foot washing,] there's an embrace that brings together and there's a literally conversation of 'Thank you brother I appreciate all you do. You meant this much to me.' It's a unifying thing once you let it. It really, really will. We don't practice it enough, we don't get serious enough with it many times. But when really get an understanding and get serious it is a unifying thing in my heart." Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁸³⁰ Athanasiou says, "Through our bodies we are implicated in thick and intense social processes of relatedness and interdependence." Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 55. She goes on to write that this because of this interdependence one's body can become dispossessed by others. Foot washing represents an affirmation of each person's body.

that the other is not external, but that all existence is co-existence.⁸³¹ Co-existence is being-singular-plural. This means that all being is both singular and plural.⁸³² Being is never for itself, the singular does not rule over being. The singular and plural both constitute existence.⁸³³ A singular being in itself is not possible. All that exists, exists in relation. The singular needs to refer to something outside the self. It needs a relation, a reference point, to relate to.⁸³⁴ One comes to understand the self through others. Being-singular is a mystery to itself without the plural of discovery. It is not that all beings are the same. Each is different, and these differences are what make each unique. Yet difference is necessary for being to exist.⁸³⁵ One knows oneself through relationship with the other.

Being is relationship. Being-singular-plural reveals that the core of being is not the isolated self. Being-singular is being-plural. Being is being-*with*, and this *with* is the essence of existence.⁸³⁶ The mind is not the foundation of existence. One cannot begin with the self to establish the self. What does one have to gain from living within the

⁸³¹ Nancy writes, “That which exists, whatever this might be, coexists because it exists...A world is not something external to existence; it is not an extrinsic addition to other existences; the world is the coexistence that puts these existences together.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 29.

⁸³² That is, according to Nancy, “Being is singularly plural and plurally singular.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 28.

⁸³³ Or as Nancy describes it, “the singular plural constitutes the essence of Being, a constitution that undoes or dislocates every single, substantial essence of Being itself.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 29.

⁸³⁴ Existence requires relation. Nancy explains “there exists something (“me”) *and* another thing (this other “me” that represents the possible) to which I relate myself in order for me to ask myself if there exists something of the sort that I think of as possible.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 29.

⁸³⁵ Nancy writes that “there does not exist just these ‘me’s,’ as subjects-of-representation, because along with the real difference between two ‘me’s’ is given the difference between things in general, the difference between my body and many bodies...In a certain way, there never has been, and never will be, a philosophy ‘of the subject’ in the sense of the final [*infinite*] closure in itself of a for-itself.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 29.

⁸³⁶ Being-singular-plural or being-with lies at the core of Nancy’s philosophy. Being-singular-plural “means the essence of Being is only as coessence. In turn, coessence, or *being-with* (being-with-many), designates the essence of the *co-*, or even more so, the *co-* (the *cum*) itself in the position or guise of an essence.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 30.

mind? Only that which one already knows. Descartes' well known maxim "I think therefore I am" establishes nothing. More fitting would be "I relate therefore I am." Relation is not an addition to being. The mind does not exist alone. The *with* of being, relationality, is being's true nature. Its form comes from function. Being is not first *is* before it is *with*.⁸³⁷ Being begins *with* before it does anything.

Being-with is being-singular-plural. It brings the self and the world into balance. The self needs the world and the world needs individuality. The goal is not to eliminate one or the other. Tillich declares, "The self without a world is empty; the world without a self is dead."⁸³⁸ All beings participate in the world. The world is a place of action. Though the self acts in the world, the self is not one with it. Being-singular signifies estrangement between one another. The self is not completely connected with other selves.⁸³⁹ Being-singular-plural points to the barrier, the "-" one needs to overcome in order be *with*. Being-with is one's destiny, but that destiny requires crossing a barrier.⁸⁴⁰ It is reaching out across the space between existences. This reaching out completes the self. Being-singular, without plural, is hollow.⁸⁴¹ Existence ought to be lived in the *with*.

⁸³⁷ Nancy emphasizes this point by writing "it is not the case that the 'with' is an addition to some prior Being; instead, the 'with' is at the heart of Being." Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 30.

⁸³⁸ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume I* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 171.

⁸³⁹ Tillich writes, "We can approach other beings only in terms of analogy and, therefore, only indirectly and uncertainly." Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 168.

⁸⁴⁰ Tillich describes this separation stating, "Being a self means being separated in some way from everything else, having everything else opposite one's self, being able to look at it and to act upon it. At the same time, however, this self is aware that it belongs to that at which it looks. The self is 'in' it. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 170.

⁸⁴¹ The self needs the world. "Without its world the self would be an empty form. Self-consciousness would have no content, for every content, psychic as well as bodily, lies within the universe." Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 171.

Living *with* lives in participation with the other. No one, Tillich says, “exists without participation, and no personal being exists without communal being.”⁸⁴² Being needs the resistance of other beings. Existence is encounter with existence. One does not truly know oneself until he or she enters the space of the other. Being-singular discovers existence through being-with. Being-singular-plural is representative of the personal encounter needed in order for the self to live and grow. One’s individuality remains a mystery until one encounters the individuality of the other.⁸⁴³ Existence comes through personal encounter.⁸⁴⁴

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Christian life. In the Christian life, Karl Barth says, as “children of God as a creation of the Holy Spirit we have to do with a determinateness of human life understood as *being* and *doing*.”⁸⁴⁵ The call of God is a call to action. The individual is united to God and to others. It is impossible to regard one as either one or the other. God calls one to act.⁸⁴⁶ The outward action, being-plural, is who one is as a Christian. This outward action, Barth declares, “Means that he [or she] cannot cease to testify that God in Christ has found him [or her]. Therefore his [or her]

⁸⁴² Tillich continues, “The person as the fully developed individual self is impossible without other fully developed selves.” Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 176.

⁸⁴³ Understanding oneself comes from understanding others. How does one understand individual unless one pushes against the barrier of other individuals? Precisely because the “individual discovers himself through this resistance...In the resistance of the other person the person is born.” Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 177. This correlates with Nancy’s arguments of existence being an origin and creation. Existence is born out of encounter. It is the creation of a world.

⁸⁴⁴ Tillich puts it the following way, “Persons can grow only in communion of personal encounter. Individualization and participation are interdependent on all levels of being.” Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 177.

⁸⁴⁵ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), 369.

⁸⁴⁶ Thus one “confronted only by God, and no one can represent him in the confrontation. But if we look at the doing or outward aspect of this same man [or woman], we find that in spite of his isolation this same man [or woman] is united in society as an individual with the whole Church, related, of course, to God, but in God to others. The impossibility of regarding him [or her] strictly from the one standpoint or the other means that we cannot treat either of these insight as exclusive. The fact is that they belong together.” Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 369-370.

being makes necessary a very definite doing. He [or she] simply cannot suppress or conceal or keep to himself what he [or she] is.”⁸⁴⁷ The call of God is the call to being-with. Being-with is the intended state of all persons. The Christian life does not privilege one’s inward state over the outward. One’s inward nature is drawn toward the outside. The life of Christ does not close toward others. It opens oneself, being-singular, to being-singular-plural. The life of Christ is a life lived *with* others.⁸⁴⁸

Being-with whom? Being-with all. Being-with is first and foremost co-existence. It is existence with others and for others. The *with* signifies the *all* of existence. Being is being-with all persons, no matter the other’s race, gender, status, or so on. The *with* is sharing. Being-with signifies that existence is a shared existence. It also recognizes beings are not all the same. Being-with does not erase the differences between beings.⁸⁴⁹ Each person is unique. Individuality is not absorbed by the *with*. The *with* brings individuals together with-one-another. Being-with reveals that each individual’s otherness. Every being individual is also an other.⁸⁵⁰ No one can escape otherness. Being is being-strange, an other, but it is being-strange-with-one-another. Being-singular-plural is both sharing and division. It is unity and separation. It is isolation and community.⁸⁵¹

⁸⁴⁷ Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 370.

⁸⁴⁸ “In the freedom of God he [or she] himself [or herself] became free and the child of God. This is the irresistible summons to action. This is what he [or she] has to reveal and declare. This is what his [or hers] whole existence has now to proclaim and attest and affirm. It is in this decision that he [or she] now lives.” Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 370.

⁸⁴⁹ Nancy makes it clear that *with* “does not indicate the sharing of a common situation any more than the juxtaposition of a pure exteriorities does (for example, a bench with a tree with a dog with a passer-by). Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 35.

⁸⁵⁰ “Being is with Being; it does not ever recover itself, but it is near to itself, beside itself, in touch with itself, its very self, in the paradox of that proximity where distancing and strangeness are revealed. We are each time an other, each time with others.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 35.

⁸⁵¹ Being-singular-plural, As Nancy puts it, “Is a mark of union and also a mark of division, a mark of sharing that effaces itself, leaving each term to its isolation *and* its being-with-the-others.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 37.

Being-singular-plural is what is difficult about relationship. Relationship and sharing are hard. Individuals struggle to move toward one other. Being-singular is difficult to overcome. One is tempted to stop at the level of being-singular. It is difficult to look past the self. Existence mistakenly begins with the *I* before the *we*. The *I* cannot fulfill itself without the *we*. Being-with, Nancy claims, “Is existence reclaiming its due or its condition: coexistence.”⁸⁵² It is being for everyone. Being-with is also being-for-all.⁸⁵³

The *with* of being does not exist in abstract. Describing *with* is describing something actual. It does not describe a presence outside experience. The *with* of being-with is actual, present, and presentable.⁸⁵⁴ The *with* exists between each person through meaningful action and presence. Though difficult and often testing, the *with* represents an actual coming together.⁸⁵⁵

OFWBs present the *with* through foot washing. What occurs during foot washing is actual. The water becomes a place of contact. It is the physical and visible *with* representing the emotional *with* between beings. What Nancy writes abstractly and philosophically is real and concrete between OFWBs. OFWBs repeatedly stress that foot washing is a coming together of individuals. Individuals that are acting, caring, and

⁸⁵² Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 42.

⁸⁵³ Or as Nancy puts it, being “must be an ontology for the world, for everyone – and if I can be so bold, it has to be an ontology for each and every one and for the world ‘as a totality,’ and nothing short of the world world, since this is all there is (but, in this way, there is *all*).” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 53-54.

⁸⁵⁴ Nancy says, “The *with* is not ‘unpresentable’ like some remote or withdrawn presence, or like an Other [italics in the original].” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 62.

⁸⁵⁵ Or coming apart. *With* can also be a point of tension. Relationship is never easy and what draws two together can also repel. *With* requires work. Being-with, coexistence, maybe the natural state of existence. This does not mean that existence is free from conflict. Nancy writes, “The ‘with’ is or constitutes the mark of unity/disunity, which in itself does not designate unity or disunity as that fixed substance which would undergird it; the ‘with’ is not the sign of a reality, or even of an ‘intersubjective dimension.’ It really is, ‘in truth,’ a mark drawn out over the void, which crosses over it and underlines it at the same time...As such, it also constitutes the traction and tension, repulsion/attraction, of the ‘between’-us. The ‘with’ stays between us, and we stay between us.” Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 62.

loving together. These OFWBs do not need to be reminded about the *with*. They live, act, and embody the *with*.

Foot washing is relationship. It is being-singular-plural. When OFWBs come together, they enter as individuals. They enter as individuals from different backgrounds and experiences. They enter as pastors and laypeople, young and old, and rich and poor. OFWBs carry their lives into foot washing. Foot washing begins at an individual level. The point is not to eliminate the individual. Foot washing does not erase identity. It does not erase the being-singular. OFWBs are not saying that identity does not matter. Instead one matters *because* of who he or she is. The whole person matters. False plurality erases identity. True plurality, that is community, is the embrace of being-singular with being-plural. It embraces individual and communal identity. Foot washing is being-singular-plural.

When OFWBs come together, they come together as individuals in community. Modeling Jesus, they accept each other for who they are.⁸⁵⁶ Without any philosophical argument, they know Jesus to be the⁸⁵⁷ and embodiment of being-singular-plural. When washing the disciples' feet, Jesus accepts the disciples as sinners, betrayers, and deserters. Despite knowing who they are and what they will do, Jesus embraces the whole person. Jesus acts as being-with. He initiates the *with*. Community, the plural, is affirmed through the *with*. As they kneel down and wash, OFWBs are connecting to Jesus. So when

⁸⁵⁶ “[Foot washing] certainly has enhanced it my experience as a Christian. It's put me more in touch with feelings of servitude and I can relate more to Jesus.” Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

⁸⁵⁷ Explaining Jesus' example, a pastor says, “The host then becomes the servant, and just unheard of. If our Lord came to be a servant, who do we think we are if were not following that example. There again the practice itself reinforces the behavior of what it means to be a part of the Christian community.” Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

OFWBs are washing feet they are continuing Christ's *with*. Foot washing is the ability to accept and connect with each as person both individually and communally. Foot washing, therefore, is a commitment to being-singular-plural.⁸⁵⁸

The OFWB perspective on humility forms through being-with. Being-with is not important because it is postmodern or philosophical. Being with, from an OFWB point of view, is humility in action. OFWBs continually stress the importance of humility in foot washing. Humility is a *with*. For OFWBs foot washing is reaching across the space between each person. Humility overcomes that space in order to build connections. Being-singular surrenders itself for the sake of washing the other's feet. Foot washing is an act of recognition, not of the self, but in the plurality of being. As OFWBs wash feet, they connect through humility. Humility physically connects individual to individual in bonds of relationship, friendship, and love. Foot washing breaks down the barrier of being-singular in order to become being-singular-plural. OFWBs find each other through the *with*.

OFWBs, *Habitus*, and Action

OFWBs live as being-with. Foot washing demonstrates this calling they have towards all people. This calling originates in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. OFWBs are also generators of meaning. That is OFWBs are not just recipients of meaning. They create new and unique meanings between one another. Foot washing is an ongoing and dynamic process. Its meaning vary from group to group. The way it is

⁸⁵⁸ This layperson discussed how foot washing draws people together. "I think [foot washing has] drawn us closer together. We are more united in belief in recognizing the significance of what Christ did for us and for his apostles. We have that common bond of belief and unity." Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

practiced, when it is practiced, and the people of practice affect its meaning. The meanings of foot washing originate in the moment. Personal stories, surprise encounters, good friends, and emotional responses point to the dynamism of ritual action. Foot washing is unique because OFWBs are unique. They play an important role in how meanings in foot washing are conveyed.

Pierre Bourdieu describes this process as *habitus*. *Habitus* is a structured behavior that does not necessarily correlate to any established rule or guide. *Habitus*, flows from “systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures...which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules.”⁸⁵⁹ All action involves a regulated series of moves and behaviors. When groups perform actions, like ritual, these actions appear to be second nature. Participants just know what to do. *Habitus* is the source and organizer of these series of moves and behaviors.⁸⁶⁰ *Habitus* is not an outside source that controls or programs action. *Habitus* rejects any mechanized theories of actions.⁸⁶¹ It rejects deterministic action that disregards the experiences and uniqueness of its participants. *Habitus* organizes group behavior and leads one towards likely, but not controlled, action.

Habitus suggests that action is strategic. Action builds on action. Participants use past experiences to inform and modify behavior. Foot washing, being a ritual action,

⁸⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 72.

⁸⁶⁰ Bourdieu explains, “The *habitus* is the source of these series of moves which are objectively organized as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention.” Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 73.

⁸⁶¹ Bourdieu maintains that it is “necessary to abandon all theories which explicitly or implicitly treat practice as a mechanical reaction, directly determined by the antecedent conditions and entirely reducible to the mechanical functioning of pre-established assemblies.” Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 73.

incorporates both collective and individual history. *Habitus* is simultaneously collector, product, and producer of this history,⁸⁶² pointing to action as a collective practice. History matters to the practice of action. *Habitus* creates a filter through which participants act. This history suggests the action's performance and the meanings it has acquired. History is thus not about control but a "matrix of perception."⁸⁶³

History and Action

History matters more than the rule of action. As OFWBs practice foot washing, they share a history of the *now*. On one level OFWBs are connecting with the living history of Jesus. More immediately, OFWBs are connecting with the history of their parents and grandparents. The history of fifty to sixty years ago is the most meaningful to OFWBs. OFWBs are connecting and re-presenting that history into the present. This is often an unconscious act. OFWBs do what they have always done. OFWBs, especially those raised OFWB, just know how to do foot washing. Therefore it is difficult for them to explain how they know the action. They do not need to consciously remind themselves of the history. History is re-presented into the present subconsciously. The history lives within OFWBs themselves. Through foot washing, history is re-presented and passed on. Foot washing becomes who they are. The history of their parents and grandparents becomes their history. History accumulates so as to produce more history. It is both

⁸⁶² Bourdieu explains that the "*habitus*, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history." Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 82.

⁸⁶³ Therefore Bourdieu describes this *habitus* as "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions." Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 82-83.

preserver and creator.⁸⁶⁴ History becomes second nature.⁸⁶⁵ History is turned into nature.⁸⁶⁶

Each individual becomes an agent of that history. OFWBs produce and reproduce the history, experiences, and meanings of foot washing.⁸⁶⁷ Individual participants are not bystanders. They are not doomed to reproduce meaning of which they have no part. These are their meanings. These meanings belong to the OFWB. Their history is added to the history of their parents and grandparents, creating a new lived present. As these actions are learned and passed through repeated action, the *habitus* both collects this history and is produced by it.⁸⁶⁸ Such practices transmits identity. Foot washing carries what it means to be Christian and OFWB. It is visible history enacted in the now. Collective history is alive through collective practice. These actions pass on a specific way and being-in-the-world.⁸⁶⁹ OFWBs pass on their ideas of humility, service, equality,

⁸⁶⁴ For example, Bourdieu suggests that this “accumulated capital, produces history on the basis of history and so ensures the permanence in change that makes the individual agent a world within a world.” Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 56.

⁸⁶⁵ Bourdieu writes, “The ‘unconscious’ is never anything than the forgetting of history which history itself produces by incorporating the objective structures it produces in the second nature of *habitus*.” Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 79.

⁸⁶⁶ E. Durkheim writes that “in each of us, in varying proportions, there is part of yesterday’s man [or woman]; it is yesterday’s man [or woman] who inevitably predominates in us, since the present amounts to little compared with the long past in the course of which we were formed and from which we result. Yet we do not sense this man [or woman] of the past, because he [or she] is inveterate in us; he [or she] makes up the unconscious part of ourselves.” Quoted in Pierre Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 79.

⁸⁶⁷ “Each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, willy nilly, is a producer and reproducer of objective meaning. Because his action and works are the product of a *modus operandi* of which he is not the producer and has no conscious mastery... which always outruns his conscious intentions.” Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 78.

⁸⁶⁸ Bourdieu further understands the *habitus* as “is the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g. of language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions.” Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 85.

⁸⁶⁹ So, for example, Bourdieu notes that groups pass on information collectively. He writes that “the essential part of the *modus operandi* which defines practical mastery is transmitted in practice, in its practical state, without attaining the level of discourse. The child imitates not ‘models’ but other people’s actions.” Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 87.

and love through the collective action of washing feet. Therefore, OFWBs know that one cannot explain foot washing. Understanding comes from doing it.

This understanding goes beyond the physical mechanics of the action.⁸⁷⁰

Understanding means that one is incorporated into a *habitus*. It is a way of seeing one another and the world. Learning foot washing means incorporation into a way of behavior. The *habitus* is sharing a world-view and way of acting in the world. It creates a particular commonality and being within a group.⁸⁷¹ Action carries more than physical movements. Action carries history and meaning.⁸⁷² Doing the action also mean doing the history it contains, thus carrying history into the present. Doing foot washing also means doing OFWB history. It is doing a history of humility, service, and love. It re-presents a communal identity of how things can be and should be. These actions demonstrate a specific type being-in-world shared in community.

Habitus and Community

Habitus highlights the important role communities play in forming identity through ritual action. *Habitus* is not programming. Its goal is not to suppress individual thought or deviation from behavior. The *habitus* is both personal and communal. It works with the individual, being-singular, in order to create a perception between the self and the world. It teaches one how to be being-singular-plural. *Habitus* is comprised of both

⁸⁷⁰ Bourdieu explains that “the fact that schemas are able to pass from practice to practice without going through discourse or consciousness does not mean that acquisition of the *habitus* comes down to a question of mechanical learning by trial and error.” Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 88.

⁸⁷¹ The *habitus*, according to Bourdieu, “could be considered as a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception.” Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 86.

⁸⁷² The *habitus*, Bourdieu explains, is a “system of dispositions – a past which survives in the present and tend to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in the practices structured according to its principles.” Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice* 82.

individual and collective experience.⁸⁷³ As such, it is a collection of individual experience and history. It shows that individual experience does not point to individualism but communalism. Individual experience is experience best shared.

Habitus points one towards possibility. It is an expectation of the world. This possibility does not originate from the self. It originates in community. *Habitus* points to what one can expect when existence is shared.⁸⁷⁴ It is not telling one what to think, but how to think together. More importantly, the *habitus* shows how to live together. It is learning how to be being-with. It is learning how to be community.

The possibility of the *habitus* is the possibility of vision. It does not determine the future, rather it is the vision for future behavior. It continually shows the *what if* of communal action. That is, it orients one towards *possibility*. The *habitus* is not deterministic, but hopeful.⁸⁷⁵ It sets the conditions for communal life. Through action and perception, it sets the tone of a community.⁸⁷⁶ It demonstrates what a being-with looks like. More importantly, it shows how to live as being-with. For OFWBs, *habitus* shows what it means to live as an OFWB.

The *habitus* does not live in the past. This is not the past dominating the future. Instead the *habitus* uses the past as a guide for living in the present. It creates a dialectic

⁸⁷³ Smith writes that the *habitus* “has a history that is both collective and individual.” Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 83.

⁸⁷⁴ Smith suggests that “*habitus* is a *condition* of possibility: like horizons of expectation, a *habitus* circumscribes just how we’ll be inclined to constitute the world. However, a *habitus* is also a condition of possibility: rather than being some limit on my range of possible experiences, it’s what makes any experience possible. The *habitus* both governs and enables perception.” Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 84.

⁸⁷⁵ “Through the *habitus*, the structure which has produced it governs practice, not by the processes of a mechanical determinism, but through the mediation of the orientations and limits it assigns to the *habitus*’s operations of invention.” Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 95.

⁸⁷⁶ The *habitus*, Bourdieu writes, “engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions, and no others.” Bourdieu, *Theory of Practice*, 95. In this case, the *habitus* sets the condition of being an OFWB.

between the past and present in order to determine how the past can live in the present.⁸⁷⁷ The *habitus* determines a course of action based on what is expected and not what will occur. Looking to the past one can expect actions to generate certain outcomes. The past matters, and experiences are not discarded. The past provides a starting point for communities.⁸⁷⁸ That means action has an origin within the community. The *habitus* formulates what one can reasonably expect from a given course of action. OFWB's have a perspective of both the past and the present. Foot washing carries the actions of those who came before. Therefore OFWBs have a reasonable expectation of what this action means for the present. Foot washing carries the past within itself. It carries, or re-presents, concepts such as humility, forgiveness, and service. Each generation encounters and comes to expect these concepts. More importantly, they physically enact them as conditioned by the *habitus*.⁸⁷⁹

A *habitus* of foot washing sets up some generally expected behaviors and attitudes. OFWBs know how and when to act when doing foot washing. Through the *habitus*, OFWBs have a good idea what to expect from one another. OFWBs know that feet will be washed, hearts will be humbled, and love will be shared. This may include singing hymns, acting in silence, or general conversation. These movements may be performed a hundred times without variation, yet the working of the *habitus* does not

⁸⁷⁷ Bourdieu describes this dialectic by stating that the "*habitus* may be accompanied by a strategic calculation tending to perform in a conscious mode the operation that the *habitus* performs quite differently, namely an estimation of chances presupposing transformation of the past effect into an expected objective." Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 53.

⁸⁷⁸ Bourdieu writes, "Unlike scientific estimations, which are corrected after each experiment according to rigorous rules of calculation, the anticipations of the *habitus*, practical hypotheses based on past experience, give disproportionate weight to early experiences." Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 54.

⁸⁷⁹ Bourdieu explains, "Through the *habitus*, the structure of which it is the product governs practice, not along the paths of a mechanical determinism, but within the constraints and limits initially set on its inventions." Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 55.

imply lack of change. There is change, subtle change, but change nonetheless. The *habitus* is both static and dynamic. It generates as well as stabilizes. Its framework is a fertile ground for adaptation and unpredictability.⁸⁸⁰

Both predictability and unpredictability bring OFWBs back to foot washing. It represents stability and re-presentation. It is doing the same actions Jesus performed, thus it suggests how OFWBs are to treat other people. Foot washing also points to the creativity of the *habitus*. There are elements that can never be predicted. One can never predict the unexpected feelings of joy, gratitude, and apperception that can suddenly overtake oneself. One never knows when a new friendship might occur. One can never guess how hearts and minds are being transformed and renewed. These experiences are neither mechanical nor forced. When washing feet, OFWBs know to expect the unexpected within the *expected* action.⁸⁸¹

The *habitus* brings individual and communal history together. Working through institutions, the *habitus* brings individual history and experience into a communal framework. On its own, individual experience does not survive past the individual. Being-singular ends as being-singular. The *habitus* saves those experiences from being forever lost. An institution preserves these experiences through the accumulated history of the *habitus*. These experiences also make institutions possible.⁸⁸² The OFWB as an

⁸⁸⁰ *Habitus* works as a balancing force. “Because the *habitus* is an infinite capacity for generating products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions – whose limits are set by historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is a remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 55.

⁸⁸¹ The *habitus* provides the conditions invention and variation. For Bourdieu, the “*habitus*, like every ‘art of inventing’, is what makes it possible to produce an infinite number of practices that are relatively unpredictable.” Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 55.

⁸⁸² *Habitus*, Bourdieu explains, “is constituted in the course of an individual history, imposing its particular logic on incorporation, and through which agents partake of the history objectified in institutions,

institution is not possible without the individual stories, emotions, and experiences that comprise it. Foot washing provides the framework for the OFWB being-in-the-world, but individual history makes this worldview possible. The *habitus* is both singular and plural. It is being-singular-plural.

Action and Counter Action

It is this being-singular-plural nature that enables the functioning of the *habitus*. The *habitus* of foot washing works because the *habitus* is “understood as a system of dispositions common to all products of the same conditionings.”⁸⁸³ Within the institution there is a mutual understanding between individuals. This mutual understanding creates an environment of sharing and anticipation. Individuals know what they can reasonably expect from one another. Each action has an expected action. Action makes possible further action.⁸⁸⁴ When OFWBs gather to wash feet, their actions pave the way for further actions. The physical action and counter actions are quite obvious. Actions such as removing shoes, kneeling, and touching feet provoke certain actions. Underneath the surface, however, a whole series of emotional moves are taking place. OFWBs learn humility, servant-hood, and forgiveness as a series of actions within a larger action. Humility becomes a visible action as well as emotional feeling. Humility responds to humility as OFWBs wash each other’s feet. Through washing and being washed, humility reacts to humility and love replies to love.

is what makes it possible to inhabit institutions, to appropriate them practically, and so to keep them in activity, continuously pulling them from the state of dead letter, reviving the sense deposited in them, but at the same time imposing the revisions and transformations that reactivation entails. Or rather, the *habitus* is what enables the institution to attain full realization.” Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 57.

⁸⁸³ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 59.

⁸⁸⁴ *Habitus* makes possible this movement of action and counter action. Bourdieu writes that “each action has the purpose of making possible the reaction to the reaction it induces.” Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 61.

Living the *Habitus*

The source of these moves is the *habitus*. They are strategic moves without a governing strategy.⁸⁸⁵ As a source, the *habitus* is not separate from action itself. The source arises within the action itself. The *habitus* lives within action, in both its past practice and present condition. The practices generated by the *habitus* continually adapt to the present. Through the *habitus*, humility becomes the expected reaction. In addition, other reactions such as love, equality, and respect are also expected. For OFWBs, emotions such as humility become the norm. It becomes the expected reaction in foot washing. More importantly, humility becomes their communal norm. It is their being-in-the-world. The *habitus* of foot washing carries over into daily life. Foot washing teaches OFWBs how to live as a Christian community.

The foot washing *habitus* is a continual reminder of how OFWBs are called to live.⁸⁸⁶ Foot washing's transformative effects are not immediately obvious. OFWBs seldom describe foot washing in those terms. The first experience of foot washing may not provoke drastic change. Instead, as *habitus*, the effects are long term. They are gentle reminders of how to act and be in the world. *Habitus* is a slow process that works on individuals gradually. One does not choose a *habitus*. One is molded into it.⁸⁸⁷ The

⁸⁸⁵ Bourdieu explains, "The *habitus* contains the solution to the paradoxes of objective meaning without subjective intention. It is the source of these strings of 'moves' which are objectively organized as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention." Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 62.

⁸⁸⁶ "Through washing of feet we demonstrate how we're called to live as a redeemed people." Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁸⁸⁷ Smith describes this process stating, "It is the cumulative effect of habituation that shapes you as a native. While you can be born into a community, no one is born a 'native' in Bourdieu's sense because 'nativity' is not genetic – it's not just a matter of blood or location. You are formed into a native. And even if you *want* to join, you cannot simply *choose* to do so." Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 93.

habitus is continually adjusting. The *habitus* carries over into life. One is learning how to live the *habitus* in one's own time and circumstances.⁸⁸⁸

The result *habitus* is foot washing brought to life. For OFWBs, foot washing does not end when the physical act is completed. *Habitus* reminds one how to live, and the body enacts the *habitus*.⁸⁸⁹ These reminders, such as servant-hood and equality, are molded onto the physical body.⁸⁹⁰ The *habitus* establishes a practical sense. Bourdieu describes practical sense as “social necessity turned into nature, converted into motor schemes and body automatisms, [practical sense] is what causes practices, in and through what makes them obscure to the eyes of their producers, to be sensible, that is, informed by a common sense.”⁸⁹¹ Practical sense goes far beyond seeing the world a certain way. Practical sense, being a communal viewpoint, calls one to act in the world.⁸⁹² As Smith describes it, “It’s not just knowledge *so that* I can act; it is to know *by acting*.”⁸⁹³ It is knowing how to act without knowing. It is action without concepts.⁸⁹⁴ Smith suggests

⁸⁸⁸ The *habitus*, as Bourdieu describes it, reminds instead of immediately transforming. The *habitus* looks at the long term implications of action. He writes, “The *habitus* is the principle of a selective perception of the indices tending to confirm and reinforce it rather than transform it, a matrix generating responses adapted in advance to all objective conditions identical to or homologous with the (past) conditions of its production; it adjusts itself to a probable future which it anticipates and helps to bring about because it reads it directly in the present of the presumed world, the only one it can ever know.” Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 64.

⁸⁸⁹ Bourdieu describes this relationship between knowledge and the body. He writes, “The body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it *enacts* the past, bringing it back to life.” Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 73.

⁸⁹⁰ Smith writes, “Our bodies are students even when we don’t realize it, and because we are so fundamentally oriented by this *habitus*, this incarnate education ends up being the more powerful.” Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 97.

⁸⁹¹ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 69.

⁸⁹² “To have acquired a practical sense is to have absorbed communally shared plausibility structures that constitute the world in certain ways – not just ‘seeing’ the world from a certain perspective but intending the world as an environment that call for certain responses and invites us to certain kinds of projects.” Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 89.

⁸⁹³ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 89.

⁸⁹⁴ Smith explains that “practical sense is a mode of understanding and orientation that operates without concepts.” *Imagining the Kingdom*, 89.

that it is “not just being-in-the-world but *doing-in-the-world*.”⁸⁹⁵ This action does not follow an internal logic that can be analyzed or measured. Instead both understanding and doing comes from acting.⁸⁹⁶ Foot washing, like other ritual actions, defies logic. It is a logic of *doing*.⁸⁹⁷

When OFWBs practice foot washing, it is a logic of doing. OFWBs are not so much concerned about the concepts. For many, because Jesus said to do it means it should be done. Doing it is following Jesus, and is living by doing. This logic, Smith contends, “is inherently pragmatic, not in the sense of being cynically instrumentalizing, but in the sense of being primarily concerned with action.”⁸⁹⁸ OFWBs are not interested in speculating about foot washing. Their thinking is tied to their doing.⁸⁹⁹ To separate foot washing from its practice is difficult for them to conceive.⁹⁰⁰ Foot washing is their identity.⁹⁰¹ It is part of their life and experience.⁹⁰² How foot washing works, while

⁸⁹⁵ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 90.

⁸⁹⁶ Bourdieu suggests that this logic “can only be grasped in action.” Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 92.

⁸⁹⁷ Ritual action has a logic that challenges typical norms. Smith says that “ritual logic defies conceptualization in a particularly intense way, almost to the extent that rites seem ‘designed’ to point up the limits of conceptual analysis and articulation. They are not ‘expressing’ what can be known by other means; rites affect what they do.” Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 91.

⁸⁹⁸ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 89-90.

⁸⁹⁹ For example, Bourdieu writes, “Rites take place because, and only because, they find their *raison d’être* in the conditions of existence and the dispositions of agents who cannot afford the luxury of logical speculation, mystical effusions or metaphysical *Angst*.” Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* 96.

⁹⁰⁰ A pastor puts it this way, “I have tried to emphasize in my churches for the people that don’t know it, it’s really not necessarily washing the feet for cleansing. That’s what we practice now in person, but I think we practice it for the purpose of teaching us what it means [to be a] fellow Christian. You’re their servant, you are to serve with them.” Interview with OFWB pastor (I), February 2, 2015.

⁹⁰¹ “I think it should be part of our identity as the Christian community. But particularly as OFWB I do see part of our identity, a cherished part of our identity.” Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁹⁰² Describing his identity, a pastor observes, “I don’t know if I weren’t a Christian in another church, another tradition that did not practice washing of the saints’ feet that I would actually be as communally minded and service minded, and socially minded as I am. In our articles of faith and our symbols for our denomination actually has the basin and the towel on it... For me that speaks volumes of what the Christian experience is supposed to be. We take up our cross like we’re supposed to and go into the world to serve. It’s in serving others that we serve Christ. To me my whole theology is shaped by OFWB doctrine with what is washing of the saints feet is supposed. I can’t really tell you how it changed

interesting, is less important. For OFWBs, foot washing is about what it does rather than how it works.⁹⁰³

Thinking and speculating requires separating one's own self. This is difficult when a practice has always been a part of one's life. It was almost impossible for OFWBs to think of their lives without foot washing.⁹⁰⁴ Foot washing has always been present. How can one conceive of their lives from a different perspective other than one's own? Their perspective comes from the body. That is by the things they do. OFWB believe through the body.⁹⁰⁵ Foot washing embodies that reality.

Foot washing reminds one that there is no escape from the body.⁹⁰⁶ Formation does not end with the body. Formation begins with the body. The body is the lens through which one sees the world. One learns through acting, touching, motion, and repetition. Learning does not begin with propositions but by *doing*.⁹⁰⁷ By living into the practice one

my theology. I guess maybe it's actually formed, it's shaped, formed, whatever word you want to use." Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁹⁰³ Practices are harmed when abstracted. Bourdieu explains, "By cutting practices off from their real conditions of existence, in order to credit them with alien intentions, out of a false generosity conducive to stylistic effects, the exaltation of lost wisdom dispossesses them of everything of everything that constitutes their reason and their *raison d'être*, and locks them in the eternal essence of a 'mentality.'" Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 96.

⁹⁰⁴ For most, the experience of foot washing is not instantly transformative. Rather it is a gradual change that adds to one's Christian experience. OFWB pastors and members describe foot washing's effects as gradual and subtle. For many, it is hard to describe how foot washing has changed their Christian experience. This pastor says, "I don't know because it's always been a part of my life. So it's not like I've ever known the Christian walk without foot washing." Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

⁹⁰⁵ Smith puts it this way, "Ritual is the way we (learn to) believe with our bodies." Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 92.

⁹⁰⁶ Drawing from Wittgenstein, Fergus Kerr thinks that "[w]hat constitutes us as human beings is the regular and patterned reactions that we have to one another. It is in our dealings with each other – in how we *act* – that human life is founded...Community is built into human action from the beginning." Wittgenstein, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997), 65.

⁹⁰⁷ D.Z. Phillips suggests that "the child does not believe in the existence of chairs and tables because it has been taught that material objects exist. It is taught to sit on a chair or at a table, and that, one might say, is what shows one's belief in the existence of material objects. A child comes to know people in its dealings with them – its mother, father, brothers, sisters, friends, the butcher, the milkman, the grocer, etc., etc. The belief is not the presupposition of its actions, but shows itself, has its sense, in those actions." D.Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism: Critiques and Alternatives* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 41.

beings to understand what that practice means. Foot washing keeps OFWBs connected to the body. The body is not a thing to ignore or abandon. OFWBs come to embrace the body of others, and through that body, their own. By crossing that boundary of intimacy, OFWBs are effectively saying that spirituality is bodily experience. That is, doing the will of Christ is enacting that will physically. Loving, serving, forgiveness, and so on happen through the body. For OFWBs, foot washing demonstrates that these concepts cannot be done in abstract. This is not propositional knowledge. It is bodily knowledge.

Being-with and *habitus* work together to shape individuals into community. These both influence and modify the interactions between people. Being-with brings together individuals, moving being-singular to being-singular-plural. It demonstrates that existence is connection. Existence is shared existence, and *habitus* lives in this shared existence. That is being-with is also acting-with. Action is shared action and therefore it influences behavior within communities. This shared action, or *habitus*, creates long lasting effects of being-with. Being-with builds the *habitus* thereby creating a new way of being, being-community. Being-community is the long term result of being-with and *habitus* working together.

Through foot washing, OFWBs live as being-with and act in a *habitus*. They are connecting and living that connection with one another. Their experience of foot washing is complete and total. When washing feet, OFWBs are connecting the present and the future. Thus, being-with is forever. Sharing existence means living and acting as with in the present and future. Foot washing symbolizes that eternal connection.⁹⁰⁸ Through foot

⁹⁰⁸ Foot washing makes that connection between one another and Christ more real. A layperson explains, “I would say that symbolically [foot washing] is a cleansing. Spiritual cleansing, cleansing our hearts and minds and consciences. Which is liberating knowing that through Christ's example we can, it makes it more real, makes it more tangible for us.” Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

washing, OFWBs give a resounding *yes* to each other. They give each other the *yes* of acceptance, the *yes* of affirmation, and the *yes* of existence. OFWBs accept one another, which is the message that each person matters and is important. Through affirmation they build and strengthen one another. OFWBs accept and affirm every existence as important and equal.⁹⁰⁹ They do this through foot washing. Foot washing is both a being-with and habitus. Being-with is a commitment to each other, while *habitus* is the living out of that commitment.

Body and Space

Foot washing also produces social space. Being-with and *habitus* work together to produce a space of relationship.⁹¹⁰ Through physical gesture, a body of relations is created among OFWBs.⁹¹¹ Physical action, continually re-enacted and re-presented, produces a way of being that is physically present. Relationship is given physical form.⁹¹² Foot washing brings relationship into the physical plane. One is able to touch and see relationship. Relationship becomes more than emotion. It becomes matter. Relationship

⁹⁰⁹ A pastor explains, “Yeah, I think it changes my outlook on servant leadership because it reminds me that just because I’m in a leadership position within a congregation, that doesn’t mean that I’m any better than anyone else and that we’re all on an equal playing field in God’s eyes. Just because I may be in the full time ministry doesn’t mean that I’m going to receive special rewards at the end of time or anything. That we’re all equal and that it’s not, my role is not to be a dictator it’s not to sit around and everyone else what to do while everyone else is doing the work. My role is to minister along with the people.” Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

⁹¹⁰ According to Lefebvre, “humans as social beings are said to produce their own life, their own consciousness, their own world. There is nothing in history or in society, which does not have to be achieved and produced.” Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden: Blackwell, 1991), 68.

⁹¹¹ This pastor explains, “I think for me the individuals, [in the past] I’ve had the opportunity to share in that practice, it does deepen one’s relationship. As a pastor I think it would be safe to say that for me, overall I was closer to the men with whom I participated in foot washing as opposed to those who didn’t practice it or didn’t attend those services. Not that there weren’t friendships there, I think it made a difference in the connections that I had with members of the congregation.” Interview with OFWB pastor (J), February 26, 2015.

⁹¹² Lefebvre writes, “Relations based on an order to be followed – that is to say, on simultaneity and synchronicity – are thus set up, by means of intellectual activity, between the component elements of the action undertaken on the physical plane.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 71.

has flesh and bones. All of this physical activity is collective and purpose driven.

Therefore, these collective physical actions are moving towards a specific goal.⁹¹³

Relationship and action work together in order to achieve the same purpose. In the case of foot washing, this is to develop a Christ-like community. That is a community built upon humility, service, forgiveness, and love. Relationship and action, both singular and corporate, work together towards achieving this goal.

This working together, or bridging, is neither intentional nor planned. Such actions are not creators of their own being. Production does imply creation. Action and relationship are not creating anything. They are a point of origin.⁹¹⁴ Production is an origin. What is happening within those actions and relationships is immensely important. They are neither creating nor pointing to something outside themselves. Instead it brings to light an experience that was always present between them. Between relationship and action, both singular and plural, there is what Henri Lefebvre calls *space*.

Space is not a thing. Space is social. This social space is interrelationship and connection. In space lives the old and new, the fresh and expected, and the allowed and prohibited.⁹¹⁵ Social space is the outcome of action and relationship. This outcome suggests what can happen, what should happen, and what should not happen. In this, it is

⁹¹³ Lefebvre explains that “form is inseparable from orientation towards a goal – and thus also from functionality (the end and meaning of the action, the energy utilized for the satisfaction of a ‘need’) and form the structure set in motion (know-how, skills, gestures and co-operation in work, etc.)” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 71.

⁹¹⁴ Space’s rationality, according to Lefebvre, “is not the outcome of a quality or property of human action in general, or human labour as such, of ‘man’, or of social organization. On the contrary, it is itself the origin and source – not distantly but immediately, or rather inherently – of the rationality of activity.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 71-72.

⁹¹⁵ As Lefebvre puts it, “(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder...Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 73.

similar to the *habitus*. However, social space suggests another level of depth, one of relation, action, and information.

This space is a network of relationships.⁹¹⁶ Lefebvre makes the case that social space “is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things.”⁹¹⁷ Space is not something one can point to and find. It appears through a network of relationship and interaction. Therefore, social space is a social experience made up of individuals and the social exchanges that occur between them. It is the lived expression of exchange between the individuals who both live in and comprise it.⁹¹⁸ Social space is produced through accumulated actions and behaviors by a community or group. As a result, space does not exist without the relations that exist between persons. These relationships form a network through which social space is manifested. Its appearance in relationships points to its complexity and *both/and* nature.⁹¹⁹ It is both natural and cultural. Social space is already there, but it needs to be cultivated to produce fruit.

OFWBs produce social space through foot washing. Through their relationships a way of being emerges. It is their lived expression of humility, service, forgiveness, and love.⁹²⁰ This social space is something they produce and live out. In their bonds with each

⁹¹⁶ Lefebvre explains that this social space “contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information. Such ‘objects’ are thus not only things but also relations.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 77.

⁹¹⁷ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 83.

⁹¹⁸ Society is situated in social spaces according to Lefebvre. He writes that “the space of society, of social life...all ‘subjects’ are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may enjoy and modify.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 35.

⁹¹⁹ There is nothing simple about relationship. For example, Lefebvre writes, “Is that space natural or cultural? Is it immediate or mediated – and, if the latter, mediated by whom and to what purpose? Is it a given or is it artificial? The answer to such questions must be: ‘Both.’ The answer is ambiguous because the questions are too simple: between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, as between work and product, complex relationships (mediations) already obtain.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 83-84.

⁹²⁰ It demonstrates OFWB character. A pastor tells how “[foot washing] is indicative of those who don't mind serving. I think we see that. We have an outreach center. We do a lot of service in our community every day. We are open every day to do that. To feed people and that sort of thing. We have a

other, accumulated layers of acting and behavior are formed. Space takes on a physical and tangible expression, not as something to be identified, but something to be lived. One does not identify space, one lives it. This space is not their own creation.⁹²¹ They are not the producers of humility and love. These things do not belong to them. OFWBs instead work as the producers, or caretakers, of these realities. In foot washing, their relationships cultivate things such as love and forgiveness. It gives them a space to grow. It is a space to grow closer to Jesus, the first to establish such a space. So when OFWBs live this space of foot washing, they are living the same space of their parents and grandparents. It is the space of their forefathers and foremothers. Ultimately, and most importantly, it is the space of Jesus.

Foot washing provides an opportunity for the future growth and development of humility, love, and service. It makes sure that these things are experienced by future generations. Social space is therefore dynamic. Dynamic in that people are the means of production. It is not a tool to be used and discarded once the opportunity arises. Lefebvre explains that “[t]hough a product to be used, to be consumed, it is also a means of production...production, produced as such cannot be separated either from the productive forces.”⁹²² The means of its production are just as important as what is produced.⁹²³

OFWBs do not practice foot washing to receive. They expect to give rather than receive.

lot of people involved...It works for us. I hope it's an indicator.” Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

⁹²¹ Lefebvre says, “Space is never produced in the sense that a kilogram of sugar or a yard of cloth is produced. Nor is it an aggregate of the places or locations of such products as sugar, wheat or cloth...It would be more accurate to say that it is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 83.

⁹²² Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 85.

⁹²³ Lefebvre writes, “Thus this means of production, produced as such, cannot be separated either from the productive forces, including technology and knowledge, or from the social division of labour which shapes it, or from the state and the superstructures of society.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 85.

What is produced is natural outcome of giving. Humility may be produced, but this requires people willing to give. The results of foot washing can be very meaningful, but are not guaranteed. Foot washing depends on actions, attitudes and behaviors of people. The potential for humility, love, forgiveness, and so on may be present, but it is unable to come without human mediation.

Thus, social space becomes the means of production. In turn, the means of production becomes bound to what it produces.⁹²⁴ The outcomes of foot washing, the social space it produces, become the means for its practice. Humility is not just a result of what happens when OFWBs wash feet. It enables the process. OFWBs stress that washing feet requires a humble, servant attitude. One cannot expect to experience humility, forgiveness, or love without first experiencing those from others. Ultimately, social space is itself what produces foot washing.

The Movement of Space

Social space takes place in networks of living relationships. These relationships form an infinite number of spaces. Social space exists alongside other social spaces.⁹²⁵ These social spaces continually connect and interpenetrate one another.⁹²⁶ These can include for example, small communities, groups, and churches. Movements, big and small, continually collide with one another. As social spaces, these movements cannot be

⁹²⁴ “As it develops, then, the concept of social space becomes broader. It infiltrates, even invades the concept of production, becoming part – perhaps the essential part – of its content.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 85.

⁹²⁵ Social space does not exist in isolation. Instead one is confronted by several spaces. All individuals, Lefebvre claims, “are confronted not by one social space but by many – indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces which we refer to generically as ‘social space’.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 86.

⁹²⁶ Lefebvre writes, “*Social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another* [italics in the original].” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 86.

separated from the larger context. Like small ripples in a large pond, these spaces penetrate, affect, and adjust to one another.⁹²⁷ Spaces, no matter how small, are constantly affecting and penetrating. Social spaces, Lefebvre explains, “may be intercalated, combined, superimposed – they may even sometimes collide.”⁹²⁸ Social space is complex and dynamic. Each space is constantly pushing and pulling against other spaces. Social space does not exist as fixed points. It is not clear when one space ends and another begins.⁹²⁹

Foot washing creates a social space, but not in isolation. It is a ripple in a large pond. Congregants bring with their own social spaces. The church exists as one of many social spaces within the community. As OFWBs wash feet, these social spaces are interacting and colliding. OFWBs are not expected to leave who they are behind. Instead they bring their whole selves, both the good and the bad, into foot washing. In addition, OFWBs bring with them everyday life and experience. For example, men talk about sports, crops, work, or other mundane topics. All these things form a unique blend of spaces. Foot washing is among these things, all of which are discussed in the doing. The experience accepts and incorporates these other spaces. Foot washing interpenetrates these other spaces. It is effected as well as affecting other spaces. Foot washing enters into daily life and experience. It is not something foreign, but engages and enhances what it means to be Christian. Once assimilated, the lessons of foot washing become natural.

⁹²⁷ Drawing from hydrodynamics, Lefebvre says, “A much more fruitful analogy, it seems to me, may be found in hydrodynamics, where the principle of the superimposition of small movements teaches us the importance of the roles played by scale, dimension and rhythm. Great movements, vast rhythms, immense waves – these all collide and ‘interfere with one another; lesser movements, on the other hand interpenetrate.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 87.

⁹²⁸ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 88.

⁹²⁹ As Lefebvre describes it, “They are not *things*, which have mutually limiting boundaries and which collide because of their contours or as a result of inertia.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 87.

Social space is not an empty container waiting to be filled with meaning. The space is already *full*. Lefebvre writes that “space is neither a mere ‘frame’, after the fashion of the frame of a painting, nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it. Space is social morphology.”⁹³⁰ It is a lived experience. There is no space to be filled because it is already full.

Social space is an encounter. It is a dynamic movement of and the things that comprise it.⁹³¹ Social space is not an escape from life, instead it embraces it. Foot washing, as social space, is an extension of everyday life. The strangeness of the action, washing feet, does not preclude its intense familiarity. When OFWBs wash feet, they extend everyday life into the moment and action of foot washing. Washing feet is a symbol⁹³² of who they are on a daily basis.⁹³³ This space is grounded in their history.⁹³⁴

⁹³⁰ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 93-94.

⁹³¹ Social space’s form, according to Lefebvre, “is encounter, assembly, simultaneity...everything that there is in *space*, everything that is produced either by nature or by society, either through their co-operation or through their conflicts. Everything: living beings, things, objects, works, signs and symbols.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 101.

⁹³² “To say that something is symbolic is to enrich it with meaning not impoverished it. We have to use symbol when are literal language is no longer adequate to describe what we’re dealing with. So when I say that the elements of Holy Communion are symbolic of the presence of Christ they are reminders of the fact that Christ is present in, though, and around the elements. He is present as he promised to be...I would say that in the same way we affirm the real presence of Christ as we gather about the table, I am willing to make the same affirmation about gathering about with the basin and the towel. We need to recognize the spirit of God who is particularly present.” Interview with OFWB pastor (C), February 4, 2015.

⁹³³ A layperson explains this symbolic effect. She explains, “To actually kneel before someone and to wash their feet. To take on that attitude of heart that belongs to a servant and recognizing that is the attitude Jesus wants us to have. To be able to serve others. To minister to them, whatever their need is. That’s just an example, a model for us.” Interview with OFWB member (A), March 3, 2015.

⁹³⁴ According to Lefebvre, “Every social space has a history, one invariably grounded in nature.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 110. Social Space is connected to environment. Social space is not separated from time and circumstances.

This space reflects who they are every day and with everyone.⁹³⁵ To understand OFWB social space is to encounter their practice. Social space is tied to everyday practice.⁹³⁶

Interpretation continually unfolds. Social space blends with daily life. It feels so natural, Lefebvre claims that, “Interpretation comes later, almost as an afterthought...The ‘reading’ is thus merely a secondary and practically irrelevant upshot, a rather superfluous reward to the individual for blind, spontaneous and lived obedience.”⁹³⁷ For OFWBs, foot washing is just part of who they are. Separating this practice for purposes of interpretation seems superfluous.⁹³⁸ The attitudes expressed during foot washing are the same as in everyday life. Foot washing becomes part of their everyday life and experience. They use this practice as a reminder of how to live every day. Foot washing exists to be lived, not analyzed. Space, Lefebvre suggests, “was produced before being read; nor was it produced in order to be read and grasped, but rather in order to be lived by people with bodies and lives in their own particular urban [or rural] context.”⁹³⁹ Space is connected with everyday life. What happens in space is real rather than theoretical.⁹⁴⁰ OFWBs practice foot washing as a real action.

Space and Tactics

⁹³⁵ Lefebvre writes, “Social space *per se* is at once *work* and *product* – a materialization of ‘social being.’” Lefebvre, *Production of Social Space*, 102.

⁹³⁶ Or as Lefebvre describes, “Nothing can be taken for granted in space, because what are involved are real or possible acts and not mental states or more or less well-told stories.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 144. Space is real and not theoretical. What happens in space matters.

⁹³⁷ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 143.

⁹³⁸ For many, it is hard to describe how foot washing has added to their Christian experience. This pastor says, “I don’t know because it’s always been a part of my life. So it’s not like I’ve ever known the Christian walk without foot washing.” Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

⁹³⁹ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 143.

⁹⁴⁰ Lefebvre writes, “Nothing can be taken for granted in space, because what are involved are real or possible acts, and not mental states or more or less well-told stories. In produced space, acts reproduce ‘meanings’ even if no ‘one’ gives an account of them.” Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 144.

Ritual action works is a tactical action. Michel de Certeau claims that “a *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus.”⁹⁴¹ Tactical action is subversive, meaning that it has to work in the contexts it finds itself. These are actions that have no control of their wider environment. Tactics lives in the space of the other. As such it maneuvers in a context that has been imposed on it.⁹⁴² A tactic is what Certeau describes as “an art of the weak.”⁹⁴³

Foot washing is tactical action, above all weak action. Foot washing is an unusual action.⁹⁴⁴ It exists on the fringes of normal action. Its unusual nature does not fit into any established context. Foot washing has to be subtle. Unlike baptism or communion, it is practiced subtly in small and intimate contexts, Typically in the evening toward the end of service. Foot washing does not “call” to others. It is more a gentle “nudging” of the heart. Its effects are going to be gentle and subtle. OFWBs understand that washing feet does not fit in the contemporary context. OFWBs quietly practice foot washing with the hope that their actions will speak louder than words. Foot washing is a weak action. It does not enjoy the privilege of power. As an everyday practice, OFWBs live and act foot washing as a countercultural model. Foot washing represents their message to the surrounding culture and environment.⁹⁴⁵

⁹⁴¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 37.

⁹⁴² For this reason, Certeau notes that, “The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power.” Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 37.

⁹⁴³ Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 37.

⁹⁴⁴ Explaining its unusual nature, a pastor explains that “the stigma is I’m not going to wash somebody’s feet. It’s nasty. Then when you explain it and you read the scripture and you see it done it means a lot more than just somebody getting dirt off your feet. It means humility and obedience and those things. That makes it special.” Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

⁹⁴⁵ Describing everyday tactical action, Certeau writes, “Dwelling, moving about, speaking, reading, shopping, and cooking are activities that seem to correspond to the characteristics of tactical ruses

Foot Washing and Walking

As a tactical action, OFWBs live this message of foot washing through walking. They write this message by walking it each day.⁹⁴⁶ OFWBs walk the message of washing feet.⁹⁴⁷ It is how foot washing is brought to life. Foot washing represents their way of proceeding.⁹⁴⁸ It subtly suggests this connection between walking and living the message. Feet are for walking, and OFWBs prepare for walking by the washing of feet. Foot washing gives the message, which is then lived in everyday life.⁹⁴⁹ Foot washing prepares each individual to walking in one's own context. OFWBs take this experience and demonstrate humility, service, and love to others. With washed feet OFWBs are expected to walk a walk of humility, service, forgiveness, and love. Pastors as well as lay people, are all prepared to walk. OFWBs are ready to walk the walk of Jesus.⁹⁵⁰

and surprises: clever tricks of the 'weak' within the order established by the 'strong,' an art of putting one over on the adversary on his [or her] own turf." Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 40.

⁹⁴⁶ According to Certeau, "The act of walking is to the urban system what this speech act is to language or to the statements uttered." Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 97. Walking creates a system or way of acting. Like the speech act, walking is conveys a message.

⁹⁴⁷ Certeau writes, "They walk...whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen." Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

⁹⁴⁸ Certeau writes, "These practices of space refer to a specific form of *operations* ('ways of operating')." Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

⁹⁴⁹ Explaining how foot washing carries into everyday life a pastor explains, "I think it sets an example of loving your fellow Christian and reaching out to them in good times, but especially in bad times. When they're going through difficult times. We can reach out to them a little ways. In fact, I think it was [name], he preached a sermon one night at the ministers' conference on washing feet without using water. That's what he was talking about. Letting the imagery of washing the saints' feet play out in everyday life. As you love and respect your fellow man." Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁹⁵⁰ Foot washing prepares OFWBs to walk the walk of Jesus. A pastor says, "Because when he was in the upper room...that is that process that takes place and that's the real purpose in our having the ordinances of our church so people can understand why you're doing this and what the love of Christ done [*sic*]. Why he choose to give himself to us that he was willing to humble himself and wash his disciples feet. And he set that example for us to do." Interview with OFWB pastor (B), March 26, 2015.

Walking acts out possibilities. Walking is, following Certeau, “a space of enunciation.”⁹⁵¹ Through walking one speaks. Walking is a way of creating, organizing, and enacting new actions or ways of behavior.⁹⁵² Walking thus establishes identity. Walking chooses which possibilities to actualize or create. One chooses what actions are important. Walking is also an act of transformation. Walkers pick and choose which possibilities to actualize. A city walker may opt to take the side street, plot a new course, discover a new short cut, or stop to shop. The walker is writing a new story each time he or she goes to work, searches for something to eat, or visits a friend. Walking is a way of living out the story of the day. It is a way of transforming one’s own space.⁹⁵³

OFWBs wash and walk, and transform their spaces. Pastors transform what it means to be a leader through servant leadership. Laypeople transform what it means to live as church through service. Foot washing transforms through improvisation. OFWB’s have no set pattern. OFWBs simply wash feet, what follows simply fall happens. OFWBs, whether they are laughing, crying, singing, or sitting in silence, are transforming experiences. Their walking speaks. Through foot washing, the OFWB trajectory steps through everyday life.⁹⁵⁴ Foot washing, at least for OFWBs, is about how you walk. It is

⁹⁵¹ Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 98.

⁹⁵² Or as Certeau describes it, “In that way, he [or she] makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements.” Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 98.

⁹⁵³ “In the same, the walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else. And if on the one hand he [or she] actualizes only a few of the possibilities fixed by the constructed order (he [or she] goes only here and not there), on the other he increases the number of possibilities (for example, by creating shortcuts and detours) and prohibitions...He thus makes a selection. ‘The user of a city picks out certain fragments of the statement in order to actualize them in secret.’” Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 98.

⁹⁵⁴ So for example Certeau says, “Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks.’ All the modalities sing a part in this chorus, changing from step to step, stepping in through proportions, sequences, and intensities which vary according to the time, the path taken and the walker.” Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 99.

about how one lives. Walking is meant to be surprising.⁹⁵⁵ Like life, walking is unpredictable. Foot washing demonstrates this unpredictability. One never knows what will happen.

Because foot washing walks, it walks from space to space. To walk is to be on the move. Walking, Certeau describes “is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper...an immense social experience of lacking a place.”⁹⁵⁶ In the country or city, people walk along to and fro in a way that seems endless. People need to be somewhere they are not. People are always on the go, unsatisfied where they currently are. There is always someplace to go. Walking, like life, is always on the go. In the same way, foot washing is on the go. It does not have a space of its own. So when OFWBs wash feet, it is often done in spaces designated for other functions. Practitioners make their own space for washing feet. Sunday school rooms, fellowship halls, and choir rooms represent the transitory nature of foot washing. It occupies spaces belonging to others.⁹⁵⁷ Foot washing prepares for walks. It reflects the life on the go, where meaning is meant to be lived. A space for foot washing would suggest that it is becoming static. Instead foot washing acts in the walking. For OFWBs, walking is really where foot washing comes to life.

Enacted Stories

The stories of foot washing are lived on the go. Their stories dwell in the uncelebrated moments of daily life.⁹⁵⁸ These are the stories of OFWBs celebrating with a

⁹⁵⁵ Certeau writes that walking “is like a peddler, carrying something surprising, transverse or attractive compared with the usual choice.” Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 101.

⁹⁵⁶ Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 103.

⁹⁵⁷ It is like, as Certeau puts it, that walking lives in “a universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed of paces.” Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 103.

⁹⁵⁸ It is the stories that connect practitioners with the meanings of foot washing. Stories make it meaningful. Without stories the practice would be empty. The stories bring one back to the event, and the present is filled with the past. Explaining how stories bring meaning, a layperson shares, “I did go to one

potluck dinner. These are the stories of OFWB men working together to build handicap ramps for members in the community.⁹⁵⁹ Foot washing's stories are animated whenever OFWBs serve. For OFWBs, their actions are connected with foot washing. It is their spatial story. Foot washing connects the OFWB story with everyday life.⁹⁶⁰ Stories are carried by the people who practice them.⁹⁶¹ Foot washing works in the lives of practicing OFWBs. Foot washing is a life long journey.⁹⁶² When walking, one is not thinking about it. Once learned, walking comes naturally. Walking creates stories. The narrative tapestry

[service] where I did go back that night and they had brought coolers of warm water into each of the rooms to use for washing feet. There's nothing wrong with that but I just thought, I remembered how I felt as young person when that cold water hit my feet. I remember the chills that that cold water did to me. I remember almost like that when the cold water when washing feet, as a child. I remember that. Then I thought, I guess when I felt that warm water, there's nothing wrong with that, but it was like, I don't know how to explain it. It was almost like we had...I can't explain it." Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

⁹⁵⁹ A pastor describes the wider impact foot washing has on the community. He recalls, "I had a guy who came from a Methodist church and he was under the impression, he said 'I think this is something that is supposed to teach me humility. If that's the case it's not coming to that because [before becoming OFWB] I would never be caught touching someone else's foot.' He actually saw a connection between washing the saints' feet and the wider community, service to the wider community. He's been one of our best deacons, one of our best Sunday school teachers. His helped us to lead projects in our community. Like I said, replacing roofs for widows and building accessibility ramps for handicap. All kinds of service in the wider community. A lot of times it's not necessarily Christians, a lot times it's not people a part of our church. Sometimes it's not Christians at all, sometimes it's someone from another church down the road. It doesn't matter who it is. If they're in need we try to help. I think that kind of effected his life to some degree, maybe not completely, but some degree he saw the connection." Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

⁹⁶⁰ "To go to work or come home, one takes a 'metaphor' – a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: everyday, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories." Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 115.

⁹⁶¹ "Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice. For this reason spatial practices concern everyday tactics, are part of them, from the alphabet of spatial indication." Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 116.

⁹⁶² Speaking of the journey, a layperson reflects, "I think [foot washings] a process of getting me to where I am today. It's taken all those people, it's taken all of that learning of service. It [has] taken learning more about who Jesus is and what he did and how he taught the disciples. There are so many things that I look at differently, so much differently. It's all built. I'm not the same person I was then. I think that the washing of the saints' feet is something that's very special in our denomination. Other people talk about it. I get teased sometimes. I can remember that in college years and young years about being teased about washing feet. I have never been ashamed of it. I just always felt it had such a special part in our lives and within our denomination." Interview with OFWB member (B), March 31, 2015.

of everyday life is comprised by where one goes, how one walks, who one walks with, and so on. Their journey is the story. The story is not an addition to the journey.⁹⁶³

As the OFWB live foot washing, they transform space. They actualize their stories into physical encounters.⁹⁶⁴ Thus, the story attaches itself to the bodies of OFWBs. OFWBs become the story, therefore, their story goes with them wherever they go.⁹⁶⁵ The OFWB story of foot washing lives in its participants, and thus finding validity.⁹⁶⁶ They are living signs of foot washing's meanings.⁹⁶⁷ Foot washing prepares OFWBs to reflect those characteristics of humility, love, service, and forgiveness. More importantly, for OFWBs, they live the story of Jesus.⁹⁶⁸ His story has now become their story.⁹⁶⁹

The OFWB Story Continues

From being-with to everyday life, the OFWB story of washing feet continues through its participants. Foot washing establishes relationship (being-with), it prescribes

⁹⁶³ Certeau makes it clear that “narrated adventures, simultaneously producing geographies of actions and drifting into the commonplaces of an order, do not merely constitute a ‘supplement’ to pedestrian enunciations and rhetorics...In reality, they organize walks. They make the journey, before or during the time the feet perform it.” Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 116.

⁹⁶⁴ Certeau claims that “space is a practiced place.” Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 117.

⁹⁶⁵ According to Certeau, “normative discourse ‘operates’ only if it has already become a *story*, a text articulated on something real and speaking in its name, i.e. a law made into a story and historicized...recounted by bodies.” Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 149.

⁹⁶⁶ Certeau writes that “every social orthodoxy makes use of instruments to give itself the form of a story and to produce the credibility attached to a discourse articulated by bodies.” Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 149.

⁹⁶⁷ The story, Certeau explains, “leads living beings to become signs, to find in a discourse the means of transforming themselves into a unit of meaning, into an identity.” Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 149.

⁹⁶⁸ A pastor describes how they strive to be like Jesus, “Here's what comes to our mind. Number one, that if you want to be like Jesus and follow his example like he asked us too, his promise was that we would be happy or blessed if we did, if you want to be like our Lord that would be one way to do that. Number two, if you want to show your love for others that's a perfect way to do so. When you're down on your knees at the foot of someone, and you're looking up at their eyes and they realize what you're doing. I think that says volumes about how much I love you and I love you with the love of Christ.” Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

⁹⁶⁹ Their story connects to Jesus' story. A pastor explains, “When we wash feet I am reminded as I get down that this is where the Lord was, this is where he expects me to be.” Interview with OFWB pastor (A), April 7, 2015.

action (*habitus*), contains networks of relationship (social space), and finally lives how in everyday lives of participants (tactical action). Foot washing is not only something that OFWB do. Foot washing is who they are. It is a lived practice. As a result, interpretation plays a secondary role. The goal cannot be to explain why or how OFWBs practice washing feet. This cannot show why it is important to OFWBs, nor why they continue to do it. Doing, not interpretation, is the pathway towards understanding.

Chapter Six: Love and Community

*Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.*⁹⁷⁰

Making Way for New Beginnings

Endings are bittersweet. Some moments and experiences are so good that one never wants them to end. These moments can feel as if they could go on indefinitely. Such moments can include a favorite movie or song. One knows that the movie will conclude and the song will finish, but time seems to stand still. There remains a hope, though vain, that maybe this time it will not end. Maybe, just maybe, it will just continue indefinitely. Of course one can always replay the song or movie, but it is not the same. That initial feeling of awe cannot be artificially re-created. Every subsequent moment lives in a shadow.

Then there are moments that cannot be recreated. A journey is a singular experience. There is no way to journey in the exact same way. One could follow the same path, but the moves and the emotions are never quite the same. It may be as rewarding, but it can never be repeated. Each step of the journey is finite. As such, this is the point of the journey. Whether it is the journey of a new career, walking in a new city, or encountering new friends, every moment is unique and precious. Every journey begins and every journey ends. Life marches on.

Beginnings and endings are the stuff of daily life. Life itself is a series of beginnings and endings that cannot be done over again. Every moment is unique and thus precious, and yet there are certain moments more precious than others. There are

⁹⁷⁰ Semisonic, "Closing Time," by Dan Wilson in *Feeling Strangely Fine* (Beverly Hills: MCA, 1998), compact disc. Originally released on March 24, 1998.

moments that, if able, one would hold onto for eternity. There are conversations that one hopes will never end. Deeply engaging dialogue, late night talk, and laughter, can give the illusion that one is beyond time. Time loses its relevance in such moments. The company of good friends is a gateway to eternity. Such moments are not about an ending. In those moments a beginning stayed a beginning, even if it only for a little while. These are the moments that grasp and hold one in awe. In these moments one wishes to be grasped and held forever. One inevitably asks, “just this once can this beginning last forever?”

Beginnings always give way to endings. Like Cinderella, the clock strikes at midnight and the magic is broken. A fantasy comes to an end and time moves on. One cannot hold onto beginnings. Like holding water, these moments fall through one’s fingers only to slip away in time. Though these moments fall away, it is right that they do for “all things have their time and purpose under heaven.”⁹⁷¹ Things cannot remain the same forever. Beginnings and endings are not solitary affairs. Existence is shared, thus beginnings and endings are made meaningful through others. Beginnings can mean new connections, bonds, and friendships, while endings bring the bittersweet pain of separation and anxiety. Beginnings and endings represent the struggle between connection and estrangement. In this struggle, moments in time are held together through connection and existence. Old connections give way to new connections and so on. Each moment bridges the old and the new.

⁹⁷¹ *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Ecc. 3:1-8. The Teacher reminds one that change is a natural part of life. No moment can last forever. There is a time to be born and a time to die.

Out of endings come new beginnings. These moments, the beginning and the end, are not separate events. The beginning and end are part of one continuous cycle.⁹⁷² The knowledge that beginnings end can make those savored moments all the sweeter. A beginning requires an ending to be a beginning, and an ending needs a beginning. In reaching the end one reaches a new beginning. Beginnings and endings co-exist. They fulfill the one other by being-with one another. So while bittersweet, an ending can never truly be final. Endings give way to reflection and retrospection. The ending thus points backward to what has been. Only at the end is one able to see the beginning. The ending points forward to what will be, thus becoming the beginning.

Theology: The End Points to the Beginning

Theology's ending is the beginning of a new conversation. It is the opportunity to renew the conversation and keep it open.⁹⁷³ Theology does not signal the end of a process or method. Theology furthers the conversation. It suggests where the conversation might be heading, while recognizing that the future remains unclear. Theology's ending is a preparation for a new beginning. This is a beginning with more questions than answers. As the conversation with foot washing continues, the goal is not to interpret OFWB foot washing theologically. The goal is to listen and further the conversation. Theology prepares one for the next beginning, where each ending prepares one for the new beginning.

⁹⁷² *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Ecc. 1:1-11. The Teacher describes the cycle of life. Ultimately all things return to the beginning only to begin again.

⁹⁷³ As David Tracy puts it, "contemporary Christian theology is best understood as philosophical reflection upon the meanings present in common human experience and the meanings present in the Christian tradition." David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 34. Theology works through the multiple meanings of Christianity and human experience. It do so not to simplify things. Theology instead embraces and furthers this complicated mix of meanings in order to further the conversation.

Estranged Existence

Being lives in a state of estrangement. Existence does not automatically begin in co-existence. One begins with an existence of the self. Separation is the universal fact of humanity.⁹⁷⁴ Human beings know that they are separated from one another. Their separation is three-fold, Tillich writes that there is “separation among individual lives, separation of a man [or woman] from himself [or herself], and separation of all men [and women] from the Ground of Being.”⁹⁷⁵ Estrangement thus affects existence on multiple levels. It is not something one can avoid. One lives in estrangement for all of one’s life. One enters alone and leaves this world in much the same way. Humanity shares this estrangement, and passes it on to the next generation.⁹⁷⁶ Such separation is unavoidable. It lives at the core of one’s being.

The difficulty of separation is not the separation. It is the knowledge that one is separated. Existence, the knowledge of being, taunts one with the knowledge of separation. The human life, Erich Fromm writes, is “*life being aware of itself* [italics in the original].”⁹⁷⁷ Life is strangely aware of other life. One is aware of being alone and separated from all that one loves and holds dear. This knowledge can create a prison of existence.⁹⁷⁸ The knowledge of existence, of one’s own separation, traps one within the self. Existence becomes claustrophobic.

⁹⁷⁴ See Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted” in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (London: Pelican Books, 1962), 156.

⁹⁷⁵ Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 156.

⁹⁷⁶ Tillich writes, “Such separation is prepared in the mother’s womb, and before that time, in every preceding generation. It is manifest in the special actions of our conscious life. It reaches beyond our graves into all the succeeding generations.” Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 157.

⁹⁷⁷ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 8.

⁹⁷⁸ Fromm explains, “This awareness of himself [or herself] as a separate entity, the awareness of his [or her] own short life span, of the fact that without his [or her] will he [or she] is born and against his [or her] will he [or she] will die before those whom he [or she] loves, or they before him [or her], the

The feeling of separation can be worse than the state of separation. To know and feel separation is to suffer anxiety. It is the anxiety of being helpless before a world over which one has no control. The world, one's environment, appears as a hostile invader.⁹⁷⁹ Separation makes the world a stranger. One shuns the world in a desperate attempt to escape and gain some control. It is the self against the world. Yet this conflict only furthers one's anxiety. The conflict reminds one of what one is missing. One feels a longing for the very connection one fights against.

Separation evokes a longing for connection. In separation, one feels a draw or call towards unity and togetherness. Separation evokes longing towards something perhaps undefined and unknown.⁹⁸⁰ In this sense, separation is also a calling. The gulf between individual and plurality calls to each. Estrangement refuses to remain silent. One *knows* that one is estranged, and this knowledge makes itself known each and every day.⁹⁸¹ Each day is a reminder of the shared estrangement between individuals. Estrangement lives at the core of existence. Existence, Tillich declares, "*Is separation!* [italics in the original]"⁹⁸² It does that affect only a misfortunate few but all.

The State of Sin

awareness of his [or her] helplessness before the forces of nature and of society, all this makes his [or her] separate, disunited existence an unbearable prison." Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 8.

⁹⁷⁹ Or as Fromm puts it, "Being separate means being cut off, without any capacity to use my human powers. Hence to be separate means to be helpless, unable to grasp the world – things and people – actively; it means that the world can invade me without my ability to react." Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 8.

⁹⁸⁰ Tillich suggests that "we as men [and women] know that we are separated. We not only suffer with all other creatures because of the self-destructive consequences of our separation, but also know *why* we suffer. We know that we are estranged from something to which we really belong, and with which we *should* be united [italics in the original]." Tillich, "You Are Accepted," 157.

⁹⁸¹ Separation, according to Tillich, "is not merely a natural event like a flash of sudden lightning, but that it is an experience in which we actively participate, in which our whole personality is involved." Tillich, "You Are Accepted," 157.

⁹⁸² Tillich, "You Are Accepted," 157.

This state of estrangement, or separation, is the state of sin. According to Paul Tillich, “To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation.”⁹⁸³ Rather than immoral acts, sin points to something fundamentally deeper about the human condition. The problem is not that human beings commit sins, immoral acts, but rather that the human condition exists in a state of sin, that is estrangement. Sin is not a category that divides the good from the bad or sinners from the righteous.⁹⁸⁴ Sin is separation.

The state of sin is life in isolation.⁹⁸⁵ It is a voluntary isolation, each individual chooses being-singular over being-singular-plural. The individual lives for the self, thus ignoring the needs of others. It is not that the singular is against the plural. Others may matter, but it is each individual living for one’s own needs. In place of unity there is a collective individuality.⁹⁸⁶ Bonhoeffer writes, “Whereas the primal relationship of [person] to [person] is a giving one, in the state of sin it is purely demanding.”⁹⁸⁷ In separation, existence takes away from existence. One’s will is placed over and against the other.

All individuals are separated from one another. No one can, Tillich writes, “penetrate the hidden centre of another individual; nor can that individual pass beyond the shroud that covers our own being. Even the greatest love cannot break through the

⁹⁸³ Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 156.

⁹⁸⁴ Tillich calls for a radical redefinition of sin. He asks, “Have the men [and women] of our time still a feeling of the meaning of sin? Do they, and do we, still realize that sin does *not* mean an immoral act, that ‘sin’ should never be used in the plural, and that not our sins, but rather our *sin* is the great, all-pervading problem of our life? Do we still know that it is arrogant and erroneous to divide men [and women] by calling some ‘sinners’ and others ‘righteous’ [italics in the original]?” “You Are Accepted,” 156.

⁹⁸⁵ “Thus, the state of our whole life is estrangement from others and ourselves.” Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 161.

⁹⁸⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer maintains that, “Every man [or woman] exists in a state of complete voluntary isolation; each lives his own life, instead of all living the same God-life.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church* (London: Collins, 1963), 71.

⁹⁸⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 71.

walls of the self.”⁹⁸⁸ The self remains alone even in the midst of others, perhaps even more so. In the midst of many people one is reminded of one’s loneliness. In the company of others, one realizes that one will never be able to see life through anyone else’s eyes. Nor will one ever experience thoughts and feelings other than one’s own. People live as a strangers to one other.⁹⁸⁹ Life lives in strangeness to life.⁹⁹⁰ This strangeness is shared by all individuals. Strangeness creates the illusion that it is the normal state of things. The state of sin is the state of being alone, but it is shared. Separation is most felt in the collective separation from and with others.⁹⁹¹ Therefore perspective struggles to move beyond the self and inevitably turns inward. Bonhoeffer writes, that “even in the awareness of the closest belonging together the ontic and ethical separateness of individual personal on account of sin can never cease... There is no overleaping the limits of the I.”⁹⁹² Strangeness persists still.

Estrangement makes life strange. Life bumps into life, and life retreats from life. Being-singular is not a unified existence. Rather, as Tillich maintains, “the depth of our separation lies in just the fact that we are not capable of a great and merciful divine love toward ourselves. On the contrary, in each of us there is an instinct of self-destruction, which is as strong as our instinct of self-preservation.”⁹⁹³ Singular existence is split

⁹⁸⁸ Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 158-159.

⁹⁸⁹ As Tillich puts it, “Feeling of our separation from the rest of life is most acute when we are surrounded by it in noise and talk. We realize then much more than in moments of solitude how strange we are to each other, how estranged life is from life.” Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 158.

⁹⁹⁰ Tillich explains that the “strangeness of life to life” is evident in the way nations and groups of people treat one another. Strangeness is also found in human apathy. Human beings are rarely show concern for issues and problems outside their immediate context. Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 159-160.

⁹⁹¹ Bonhoeffer writes that “the qualitative nature of sin, that the misery caused by sin is infinitely great; this means that I must have not only an individual but also a supra-individual significance... Thus the perception that *in sin* on is to the highest degree alone leads to the perception that one’s sin is to the widest extent shared.” Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 72.

⁹⁹² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 80.

⁹⁹³ Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 160.

existence. There is something within the self that is uncomfortable with being-singular. There is the knowledge that one needs others. The self knows that its own fulfillment is connected to the fulfillment of others. When trapped in existence, one becomes destructive to both the self and the other.⁹⁹⁴ The personal life, or fulfilled life, can only occur through encounter.⁹⁹⁵ Without such an encounter, the split within the self and others only grows larger. Thus, there is no full actualization of the personhood. One remains forever caught in the split of estrangement both externally and internally. Therefore estrangement is also a split within one's own aim in life. When one is split both internally and externally, life becomes a mystery to itself.⁹⁹⁶ One is estranged from the depth of existence. This estrangement leads to despair, the feeling "that there is no escape."⁹⁹⁷ According to Tillich, when there is no escape life spirals into "feelings of meaningless, emptiness, doubt, and cynicism – all expressions of despair, of our separation from the roots and the meaning of our life. Sin in its most profound sense, sin, as despair, abounds amongst us."⁹⁹⁸ Sin is selfish. It does not release its hold easily. Sin prefers that one would remain in isolation and despair. It is content with separation. In

⁹⁹⁴ In estrangement, Tillich writes, there is a "tendency to abuse and to destroy others. Cruelty toward others is always also cruelty toward ourselves. Nothing is more obvious than the split in both our unconscious life and conscious personality." Tillich, "You Are Accepted," 160.

⁹⁹⁵ Tillich says, "Personal life emerges in the encounter of person with person and in no other way. If one can imagine a living being with the psychosomatic structure of man, completely outside any human community, such a being could not actualize its potential spirit." Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume III: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 40.

⁹⁹⁶ For example, Tillich says that "our whole life is estrangement from others and ourselves, because we are estranged from the Ground of our being, because we are estranged from the origin and aim of our life. And we do not know where we have come from, or where we are going. We are separated from the mystery, the depth, and the greatness of our existence." "You Are Accepted," 161.

⁹⁹⁷ Tillich, "You Are Accepted," 161. Also see Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit And Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

⁹⁹⁸ Tillich, "You Are Accepted," 162.

separation sin's hold increases.⁹⁹⁹ Sin convinces one that the separation is normal, that one does not need anyone else for fulfillment.¹⁰⁰⁰ Estrangement makes one blind to the world outside the self. Being-singular becomes both the beginning and end of existence. This self-imposed blindness only furthers one's shame. It blinds one to the true source of shame, thus one is doubly damned. There is the damnation of estrangement and blindness to that estrangement. The cure to that estrangement can only begin when one acknowledges estrangement. Acknowledgement puts one on the path of love. It puts one on the path of reunion.¹⁰⁰¹

Love

Love as Reunion

Existence is separation, but it does not have to remain that way. One knows the feeling of separation, but one also knows the longing towards unity. Being-singular is driven toward being-with and plurality. This drive toward the other is love. The action of life is animated by love.¹⁰⁰² Love "is the drive towards the unity of the separated."¹⁰⁰³ Being-singular is aware of that which fulfills its existence. Like star-crossed lovers, being calls to being. This call is not toward the unknown, but rather towards what was once

⁹⁹⁹ According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Sin demands to have a man [or woman] by himself [or herself]. It withdraws him [or her] from the community. The more isolated a person is the more destructive will be the power of sin over him [or her], and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his [or her] isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown...it poisons the whole being of a person." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 118.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer writes that the "root of all sin is pride, *superbia*. I want to be my own law." Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 113.

¹⁰⁰¹ Fromm claims, "*The awareness of human separation, without reunion by love – is the source of shame. It is at the same time the source of guilt and anxiety* [italics in the original]." Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 9.

¹⁰⁰² Tillich says, "Life is being in actuality and love is the moving power of life. In these two sentence the ontological nature of love is expressed." Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (London: Oxford University, 1972), 25.

¹⁰⁰³ Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 25.

known. Life may be strange, but it was not always so.¹⁰⁰⁴ In strangeness one recognizes the familiar. Life calls out to life because one knows that one belongs to the other, and vice versa.¹⁰⁰⁵ Estrangement cannot exist without the knowledge of unity. One knows one's estrangement because the memory of unity has not be completely wiped away.¹⁰⁰⁶ Like a still small voice the memory reminds one that things were not always this way. One knows that something is wrong even if it cannot be named. One struggles against this voice in order to forget it, but the memory will not fade away.¹⁰⁰⁷

Love is the reminder of the way things were. Love nags at one's existence, pushing one to look outward instead of inward. It unites the self-centered self with another self-centered self. That is love brings together what is already complete.¹⁰⁰⁸ Estrangement cannot exist without unity, and love cannot exist without separation. In love what was radically separated and self-centered comes together.¹⁰⁰⁹ Though complete, being-singular desires reunion. It is driven by love. The individual, Tillich

¹⁰⁰⁴ *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Gen. 3:1-24. The ultimate tragedy of the Fall is not that Adam and Eve disobeyed God. The story of the Fall is tragic because Adam and Eve were separated from each other and God. They know longer enjoyed the unity they have previously experienced. Original sin is not inherited and passed on through procreation (Augustine). It is the state of being separated both externally and internally.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Tillich describes this phenomena as belongingness. He writes, "Unity embraces itself and non-being. It is impossible to unite that which is essentially separated. Without an ultimate belongingness no union of one thing with another can be conceived. The absolutely strange cannot enter into a communion. But the estranged is striving for reunion." Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 25.

¹⁰⁰⁶ "Estrangement presupposes original oneness." Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 25.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Tillich attempts to describe this voice. He writes, "We are separated from the mystery, the depth, and the greatness of our existence. We hear the voice of that depth; but our ears are closed. We feel that something radical, total, and unconditioned is demanded of us; but we rebel against it, try to escape its urgency, and will not accept its promise." Tillich, "You Are Accepted," 161.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Tillich explains, "Love reunites that which is self-centered and individual. The power of love is not something which is added to an otherwise finished process, but life has love in itself as one of its constitutive elements." Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 26.

¹⁰⁰⁹ In love, Tillich describes, "Separation is overcome. But without the separation there is no love and no life. It is the superiority of the person-to-person relationship that it preserves the separation of the self-centered self, and nevertheless actualizes their reunion in love." Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 27.

says, “Strives to reunite himself [or herself] with that to which he [or she] belongs and from which he [or she] is separated.”¹⁰¹⁰

In love one strives to participate with the other. One is striving against the greatest barrier of all, the barrier between each individuals. One strives to participate in the life of the other. It is a desire for closeness and intimacy. One hopes that, with enough effort, one will be able to participate in another’s life. The ultimate desire of being is to know another being fully and completely. Love moves one towards this goal despite the knowledge that it is unattainable. In love one participates in the life of the other, but this participation is also separation.¹⁰¹¹ One endures this separation because it is only through participation that a person becomes a person. Participation is the place of encounter.¹⁰¹² In this place of encounter one is affirmed as both singular and plural. One strives toward the other in a courageous act to be both one and in part.¹⁰¹³ The courage to be is the courage to encounter the other. Love is both the drive and the result. Separation and reunion is a cycle of love seeking love.

Love as Knowing

Love seeks to know the other. To fully know the other is to love the other.¹⁰¹⁴ Knowing and love go hand in hand. Love drives the reunion between the separated so that they may finally know one another and see face to face. As a result the act of

¹⁰¹⁰ Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 29.

¹⁰¹¹ Tillich writes that participation is “being a part of something from which one is, at the same time, separated. Literally participation means ‘taking part.’” Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 88.

¹⁰¹² According to Tillich, “Only in the continuous encounter with other persons does the person become and remain a person. The place of this encounter is community.” Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 91.

¹⁰¹³ The courage to be “is essentially always the courage to be as a part and the courage to be as oneself, in interdependence.” Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 89-90.

¹⁰¹⁴ Or as Tillich puts it, “Full knowledge presupposes full love.” Paul Tillich, “Knowledge Through Love” *The Shaking of the Foundations* (London: Pelican Books, 1962), 114.

knowing is an act of love. Knowledge cannot exist without love, nor can love exist without knowledge. In love, the self penetrates into the life of the other, and vice versa. In that act of penetration, one discovers oneself in the life of the other. One comes to know oneself by knowing the other.¹⁰¹⁵

Love's knowledge goes beyond knowing *about* another person. One can know a person without actually *knowing* him or her. For example one may know *about* a certain celebrity. One can know their likes or dislikes, political opinions, and habits. Yet one does not really *know* that individual. The same can be said of co-workers, acquaintances, and some friends. At what level does knowing *about* become *knowing*? Love penetrates that barrier between knowing *about* and *knowing*. Fromm makes the case that love "is the daring plunge into the experience of union."¹⁰¹⁶ Love holds nothing back. One will only *know* the other when one loves the other. Love and knowledge cannot be separated.

In love and knowledge one is able to *see* into the life of another. One sees the other as the other see him or her. It is thus a face to face encounter into the life of another.¹⁰¹⁷ This love, Tillich describes, "Is a seeing love, a knowing love, a love that looks through into the depth of our hearts."¹⁰¹⁸ Separation is a longing for knowing the other, but it is also a longing to be known. The loneliness of the heart can only be satisfied when it is known. It is the voice of existence calling out, wishing and waiting for another voice to respond. One wants to be heard, to be seen, and to be known. To be

¹⁰¹⁵ "In the act of loving, of giving myself, in the act of penetrating the other person, I find myself, I discover myself, I discover us both, I discover [humanity]." Fromm, *The Act of Loving*, 31.

¹⁰¹⁶ Fromm, *The Act of Loving*, 31.

¹⁰¹⁷ Therefore, "in love, the seeing face to face and the knowledge of the centre of the other *I* are implied." Tillich, "Knowledge Through Love," 114.

¹⁰¹⁸ Tillich, "Knowledge Through Love," 114.

known is fundamentally important for one's own being. Existence needs to be acknowledged.¹⁰¹⁹ Existence cries out for love.

In theory, separation is impossible to overcome. But love bridges that gap between the seemingly impossible and the possible. Love is a bond that bridges these polar opposites. Tillich writes, "Full knowledge does not admit a difference between itself and love, or between theory and practice. Love overcomes the seeming opposition between theory and practice; it is knowing and doing at the same time."¹⁰²⁰ It is *being* singular-plural and *doing* singular-plural. It is full knowledge, it is both a state and an action. Love is the overcoming of estrangement, but it is also the act of doing so.

Love, Desire, and Defeat

Love is both the state and action of overcoming estrangement. As both a state and action, love is a coming to know the other. It does so at great cost and effort. Love is the greatest risk a human being can take. Love reaches out with a daring passion for the other. It sets aside what it knows for the sake of the unknown. It is this unknown that makes love such a risk for both the self and the other. The participation and pull between the separated consists of risks and potential pitfalls. Nothing about love is easy. It is just as likely to fail as it is to succeed.

Love is blind or so the saying goes. It is neither stable nor predictable. This is partly due to estrangement. Estrangement blinds each individual in its fog making it difficult to see beyond. However, *love is blind* is more than just estrangement. Love is an embrace of the unknown, unpredictable, and unexpected. Love *leaps* into the other's

¹⁰¹⁹ "The 'thou' demands by his [or her] very existence to be acknowledged as a 'thou' for an 'ego' and as an 'ego' for himself. This is the claim which is implied in his being." Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 78.

¹⁰²⁰ Tillich, "Knowledge Through Love," 115.

unknown. One's own certainty can never account for the other's unknown. In love, one faces the unknown fate of the other. One gives oneself up to the unknown chasm of love's fate. Zygmunt Bauman writes that "love means opening up to that fate, that most sublime of all human conditions, one in which fear blends with joy into an alloy that no longer allows its ingredients to separate."¹⁰²¹ Love charts a course towards the unknown, yet this journey is not for the self alone. In love, two or more share this unknown and uncharted journey. The self and the other sail toward one another on a mutual journey of discovery and exploration. Therefore this journey into the unknown requires both humility and courage.¹⁰²² Humility begins the journey, but it takes courage to stay on it. Love is both the state of openness and the will or action to remain so.

Love takes courage because it is always on the brink of defeat, therefore it is forced to plunge ahead into the unknown depths of estrangement and isolation. Love, Bauman writes, "Leaves no fortified trenches behind to which it could retreat, running for shelter in case of trouble."¹⁰²³ Love has nowhere to go but forward. It has no safe zone or space to escape in case things go wrong. It has to bet everything, its very existence on the future. Love invests in the future rather than the past.¹⁰²⁴

The courage to love is also the courage against desire. Love and desire, while similar, have different goals. Desire seeks to consume the other. It sees the other as

¹⁰²¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 7

¹⁰²² "Without humility and courage, no love. Both are required, in huge and constantly replenished supplies, whenever one enters an unexplored and unmapped land, and when love happens between two or more human beings it ushers them into such a territory." Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 7.

¹⁰²³ Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 8.

¹⁰²⁴ Bauman describes love as an investment into an uncertain future. He writes that love "will never gain confidence strong enough to disperse the clouds and stifle anxiety. Love is a mortgage loan drawn on an uncertain, and inscrutable, future." Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 8.

something there for its own pleasure.¹⁰²⁵ Desire does not truly wish for connection. Its reach is one of consumerism and consumables. The other is something to be used and discarded once one is done. Desire is drawn to the other's consumable nature, but is equally repelled once done.¹⁰²⁶ Thus desire is the will of the *I*. It roams about searching for more to consume yet is never satisfied. Desire eventually faces its own self-destruction. It eventually consumes itself when there is no one left. The path of desire is the path of the *I*. Eventually there is nowhere left to retreat to. It must consume itself, thus passing away into nothingness. Desire is a black hole. One enters the event horizon never to return.

Love is an escape from the black hole of the self. It seeks the other for the sake of the other. That is love looks at the other as something to care for.¹⁰²⁷ Unlike desire, love looks to the other for its own existence. It sees in the other a clue to its own nature. Love bonds the other to the self in a symbiotic relationship. In love, the self and the other increase one another. Each existence, the self and the other, are expanded through love's embrace.¹⁰²⁸ This expansion differentiates love from desire. Bauman describes love as "being-in-service."¹⁰²⁹ Being-in-service means that love not only seeks the other, but love

¹⁰²⁵ Bauman explains, "Desire is an impulse to strip alterity of its otherness; thereby, to disempower." Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 9.

¹⁰²⁶ According to Bauman, "Consumables attract; waste repels. After desire comes waste and disposal. It is, it seems, the squeezing of alienness out of alterity *and* the dumping of the dessicated carapace that congeal into the joy of satisfaction, bound to dissipate as soon as the job is done. In essence, desire is the urge of destruction." Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 9.

¹⁰²⁷ Bauman explains that love is "the wish to care, and to preserve the object of the care." Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 9.

¹⁰²⁸ Bauman writes, "Love is about adding to the world – each addition being the living trace of the loving self; in love, the self is, bit by bit, transplanted onto the world. *The loving self expands through giving itself away to the loved object* [italics in the original]." Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 9.

¹⁰²⁹ Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 10.

seeks in order to care for that other. Desire seeks to consume, whereas love seeks to add. Desire is temporary, but love builds for eternity.¹⁰³⁰

Love needs to continually fight the urge to control and bind the other,¹⁰³¹ whereby love becomes a twisted version of itself where it controls the other. Love struggles against itself in an internal conflict between service and preservation. It struggles against the fear of estrangement and separation anxiety. Estrangement is never fully overcome, yet the self can convince itself that it can. As such, this resistance of estrangement becomes a version of estrangement itself. Love entraps the other and isolates it. The other is irrevocably bound in the self's gaze. The other neither grows nor diminishes, but remains frozen in time.¹⁰³² The fear of separation replaces love.

Love's greatest enemy is fear, not desire. Desire is clear about what it wants. It wants the other for its own sake. Fear, on the other hand, masquerades as love. It believes it has the other's best interests at heart. It fears the potential loss of love. Love, Bauman writes, is "suspending the answer, or refraining from asking the question... It means consent to the future's indefiniteness."¹⁰³³ Love resists fear and remains open to the future and all its possible outcomes. It accepts the possibilities of both success and failure. Love is not a guarantee but a hope for the future.

¹⁰³⁰ Or as Bauman describes it, "Love is a net cast on eternity, desire is a stratagem to be spared the chores of net weaving. True to their nature, love would strive to perpetuate the desire. Desire, on the other hand, would shun love's shackles." Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 10.

¹⁰³¹ Bauman writes that love "takes captive and puts the apprehended in custody; it makes an arrest, for the prisoner's protection." Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 10.

¹⁰³² Bauman makes the case that "lovers want to smother, extirpate and cleanse the vexing, irritating alterity that separates them from the beloved; separation from the beloved is the lover's most gruesome fear, and many a lover would go to any lengths to starve off the spectre of leave-taking once and for all... Wherever I go, you go; whatever I do, you do; whatever I accept, you accept; whatever I resent, you resent. If you are not and cannot be my Siamese twin, be my clone!" Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 17.

¹⁰³³ Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 20.

Love's Crossing

Love bridges theory and practice. There is a special relationship between love and thinking. Love lies at the heart of all thinking, and thinking is an act of love. Jean-Luc Nancy writes, "Love does not call for a certain kind of thinking, or for a thinking of love, but for thinking in essence and in its totality. And this is because thinking, most properly speaking, is love."¹⁰³⁴ In philosophy and theology there is a thinking love. Love is at the heart of both disciplines. In thinking love, philosophy and theology move towards an acceptance of all the possibilities. That is both disciplines remain open to love in all its forms.¹⁰³⁵ Without love, Nancy says, "the exercise of the intellect or of reason would be utterly worthless."¹⁰³⁶

Neither philosophy nor theology achieve a thinking love, despite it being at the center of both.¹⁰³⁷ Love is viewed as an achievement rather than an experience. It is a means towards an end.¹⁰³⁸ Love is used one toward a certain goal such as completion or fulfillment.¹⁰³⁹ Love is a thing to be used instead of an experience. Philosophy and theology hold all the power when love is used. Love cannot be neatly organized. It is

¹⁰³⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, "Shattered Love," trans. Lisa Garbus and Simona Sawhney in *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 84.

¹⁰³⁵ Nancy explains that "all, of love, is possible and necessary, that all the loves possible are in fact the possibilities of love, its voices or its characteristics, which are impossible to confuse and yet ineluctably entangles: charity and pleasure, emotion and pornography, the neighbor and the infant, the love of lovers and the love of God, fraternal love and the love of art, the kiss, passion, friendship... To think love would thus demand a boundless generosity toward all these possibilities." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 83.

¹⁰³⁶ Nancy, "Shattered Love," 84.

¹⁰³⁷ "Philosophy never arrives at this thinking – that 'thinking is love' – even though it is inscribed at the head of its program, or as the general epigraph to all its treaties." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 86. Given the relatedness between philosophy and theology, a similar argument can be made for theology.

¹⁰³⁸ According to Nancy, "philosophy always thinks love as an accomplishment, arriving at a final and definitive completion." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 86.

¹⁰³⁹ Nancy, "Shattered Love," 87. Nancy lists the ways philosophy as historically used love.

unpredictable and messy.¹⁰⁴⁰ As such, love is not something one uses to overcome estrangement. It is a presence that grasps.

As a presence, love occurs over and over. Its work is never complete. Love is a continually encounter. It lives in the cycle between the self and other and thus returns over and over again.¹⁰⁴¹ Love's transcendence enables this encounter to take place.¹⁰⁴² However, this is a special kind of transcendence. It is not the transcendence of the singular self. Love transcendence is the all-encompassing experience that comes from the outside. It is the outside itself.¹⁰⁴³ This means that love is not linear. It does not simply move from the singular to the singular. Love encompasses both as the other.¹⁰⁴⁴ It encompasses the singular and the plural. Thus it is both an arrival and a departure in an endless coming and going. According to Nancy, "Love arrives, it comes, or else it is not love. But it is thus that it endlessly goes elsewhere than to 'me' who would receive it: its coming is only a departure for the other, its departure only the coming of the other."¹⁰⁴⁵ In both coming and going love endeavors to bring together the separated. It brings the total being, being-singular, into relationship with the other. Love, for being-singular, is an

¹⁰⁴⁰ Nancy writes that in the hands of philosophy and theology love "operates in an identical manner between all the terms in play: The access and the end, the incomplete being and the complete being, the self and the beyond the self, the one and the other, the identical and the different. The contradiction of the contradiction and of the non-contradiction organizes love infinitely and in each of its meanings." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 87.

¹⁰⁴¹ "We will have to admit that the rendezvous, our rendezvous with love, takes place not once, but an indefinite number of times." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 93.

¹⁰⁴² Because, "Love is the act of a transcendence." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 97.

¹⁰⁴³ Nancy describes it as something that "does not pass through the outside, because it comes from it...Love does not stop, as long as love lasts, coming from the outside. It does not remain outside; it is this outside itself, the other." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 97.

¹⁰⁴⁴ In this movement, Nancy writes, "the transcendence of love does not go from the singular being toward the other, toward the outside. It is not the singular being that puts itself outside itself: it is the other, and in the other it is not the subject's identity that operates this movement or this touch." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 97.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Nancy, "Shattered Love," 98.

experience of both departure and arrival, loss and gain. One has to lose oneself for the other in order to experience the gain of the other. Reunion is both a giving and receiving.

Love is also an exposure. One exposes oneself, one's total being, to the other. Love cuts being, exposing finitude, and thus creates a space for the other.¹⁰⁴⁶ This cut breaks the self, being-singular in its completeness, in order to make the heart.¹⁰⁴⁷ Without this break there is no room for the other. The singular has to be broken for the plural. The I is broken so that the *we* can exist. Being-singular-plural remains a coming together of total centered selves. In the being-singular, love opens the smallest of cracks. Love makes room from the other so that the other is not just an addition to being. The other is incorporated into being. A broken heart becomes a loving heart. It is a heart that embraces finitude, thus exposing the truth of finitude. It is the truth that one has to be broken in order to be whole.¹⁰⁴⁸

The cut of love never rests. Its constantly cutting the self. It renews that break so that the fissure is never sealed. It makes sure that the other is never pushed away. Therefore it will move across that first cut in order to keep the separation at bay.¹⁰⁴⁹ Being-singular wants to pull away. It wants to flee the other and return to the self. Like two repelling magnets, love has to pull them together, for separation desires its own return. The state of sin is not easily defeated. Therefore love's cut can never end. It

¹⁰⁴⁶ Nancy says, "Because the singular being is finite, the other cuts across it (and never does the other 'penetrate' the singular being or 'unite itself' with it or 'commune')." Love unveils finitude." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 98.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Nancy suggests that it is the "break itself that makes the heart." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 98.

¹⁰⁴⁸ As Nancy puts it, "Love cuts across finitude, always from the other to the other, which never returns to the same – and all loves, so humbly alike, are superbly singular. Love offers finitude in its truth; it is finitude's dazzling presentation." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 99.

¹⁰⁴⁹ According to Nancy, "Love does not simply cut across, it cuts itself across itself, it arrives and arrives at itself as that by which nothing arrives, except that there is 'arriving,' arrival and departure: of the other, always of the other, so much *other* that it is never *made*, or done." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 102.

cannot because love is a constant challenge between the self and the other.¹⁰⁵⁰ Love's pull and cut will return again and again so that the other can remain. Love, Nancy writes, "Comes *across* and never simply *comes* to its place or to term, that it comes across itself and overtakes itself, being the finite touch of the infinite crossing of the other [italics in the original]."¹⁰⁵¹ No separation is too great for the cut of love.

Love is Giving

The love's cut is also an act of giving. It is the action of giving oneself to the other. As such, nothing about love is passive. Love is first and foremost an action of giving.¹⁰⁵² In love, one gives and receives. Thus love requires two. One cannot give to one's self. Certainly one can give oneself a gift, but in such a case nothing is lost. One gains without loss. Giving, as love, is giving of plurality. It is the act of giving one's own self to another.

Life is a gift that one can share with another. The act of love is the act of enriching the other with the gift of the self. Love is the gift of life. One takes what is most alive in oneself, one's uniqueness, and shares that with another. The gift of love is comprised of one's hopes, dreams, and passions. Giving, however, is more than that. One can share one's own joy with little loss to the self. The gift of love has to be the gift of the total self. As such, when one gives, one is also giving those things hidden away. Giving is

¹⁰⁵⁰ Fromm describes love as a challenge. He writes that love "is a constant challenge; it is not a resting place, but a moving, growing, working together." Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 103.

¹⁰⁵¹ Nancy, "Shattered Love," 102.

¹⁰⁵² Fromm describes love as an activity. He explains that "the active character of love can be described by stating that love is primarily *giving*, not receiving." Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 22.

also the gift of one's sadness, fears, neuroses, and secrets to the other. Giving gives all that is alive.¹⁰⁵³

Giving enriches others. Love gives in order to share in one another's mutual *aliveness*. In mutual *aliveness* the categories of giver and receiver are blurred. Giving love becomes receiving love. Giving, Fromm explains, "enhances the other's sense of aliveness by enhancing [one's] own sense of aliveness."¹⁰⁵⁴ Giving also gives to the receiver.¹⁰⁵⁵ This is why giving love is never truly a loss.¹⁰⁵⁶ The self does give itself away to the other. The self passes away for the sake of enhancing the other with its own life, its own *aliveness*. What the self loses pales in comparison to what is gained. In mutual *aliveness* the giver and receiver celebrate their shared joy. The giving of love is the giving of life.¹⁰⁵⁷

Love can never be compelled or demanded. Love remains first and foremost a gift.¹⁰⁵⁸ It has to be a gift, for any other way carries the risk of a law. Love does not

¹⁰⁵³ Fromm believes that one gives "him [or her] of that which is alive in [oneself]; [one] gives him [or her] of [one's] joy, of [one's] interest, of [one's] understanding, of [one's] knowledge, of [one's] humor, of [one's] sadness – of all expressions and manifestations of that which is alive in [oneself]. Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 24.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 24-25.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Rahner writes, "God's self-communication is given not only as gift, but also as the necessary condition which makes possible an acceptance of the gift which can allow the gift really to be God, and can prevent the gift in its acceptance from being changed from God into a finite and created gift which only represents God, but is not God [Godself]." Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 128.

¹⁰⁵⁶ For example, Fromm makes the case that "in giving he [or she] cannot help bringing something to life in the other person, and this which is brought to life reflects back to him [or her]; in truly giving, he cannot help receiving that which is given back to him [or her]." Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 25.

¹⁰⁵⁷ According to Fromm, "*Love is the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love.*" Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 26.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Love, Nancy claims, is "neither unique nor necessary. It comes, it is offered; it is not established as a structure of being or as its principle, and even less as its subjectivity." Nancy, "Shattered Love," 273.

wished to be defined, structured, or named. It lives in the surplus of being as a gift.¹⁰⁵⁹ As such love remains a surprise to sin. Love cannot be prepared for, nor can it be predicted. It is a mystery to sin and therefore has the element of surprise.

Love as the Essence of Life

Love is a reunion between the separated. It is an event that grasps individuals and moves them from being-singular to being-singular-plural. Love is the essence of life. It is also, Karl Barth writes, “the essence of Christian living.”¹⁰⁶⁰ Love and Christian living have a special unity. The Christian life is a life grasped by love. The Christian life begins and ends with love. Christian action is the action of love.¹⁰⁶¹ The Christian life does not create love. There is, Barth asserts, “nothing in the Christian life which can precede love, the love of God for [humanity] must first precede the Christian life.”¹⁰⁶² By itself, the Christian life has no power to overcome estrangement. Christian living, separate from love, is impossible.

The Christian identity begins in love. In love one is grasped and transformed by love’s cut across being. In love one experiences the presence of God. God being that which, Barth writes, “opens our eyes and ears and therefore kindles our faith. When that occurs, the Christian life begins.”¹⁰⁶³ Love recreates human reality, living in the event of

¹⁰⁵⁹ Nancy writes that love “is not established as a structure of being or as its principle, and even less as its subjectivity. One would thus define a necessity without a law, or a law without necessity, thus: the heart of being within love, and love in surplus of being.” Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 273.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), 372.

¹⁰⁶¹ According to Barth, “The Christian Life begins with love. It also ends with love, so far as it has an end as human life in time. There is nothing that we can or must be or do as a Christian, or to become a Christian, prior to love. Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 371.

¹⁰⁶² Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 372.

¹⁰⁶³ Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 372.

human action. Love's cut moves through action, thus giving love a physical reality.¹⁰⁶⁴ Love does not change action into another substance. Love is not a replacement of the physical.¹⁰⁶⁵ One finds the true purpose of human action in love. Human action is not swept away as if it does not have value. Nor is it replaced as something inferior and worthless. Physical action is already meaningful, but love brings out the physical's full potential. In love one finds the subject of one's action.¹⁰⁶⁶

Love speaks and reminds one, Barth declares, so that "God's love for us is an overwhelming, overflowing, free love."¹⁰⁶⁷ Love is free, and its outpouring is neither solicited nor necessary. Love's movement is the free mercy and kindness of God's very self. It is this self, as love, which one encounters.¹⁰⁶⁸ One's love grows in love itself. It is not that one is incapable of love. One already believes that one has a knowledge of what love is.¹⁰⁶⁹ Unfortunately this love is a love that exists in separation. It is a pale shadow of love's full potential. This love longs for union, but it does not understand how to achieve that. One's own love lacks the strength to overcome separation. This is because

¹⁰⁶⁴ Barth says, "A creaturely reality, let us say, which as such, as human self-determination, is re-created by [Godself] in the sphere or light of the divine predetermination, thus being transformed, becoming love instead of non-love, but not ceasing on that account to be human self-determination and therefore a creaturely reality." Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 373.

¹⁰⁶⁵ For example, Barth writes that "We cannot therefore say that it is the product of a transformation of the creaturely into divine reality, nor can we say that in it the divine reality has taken the place of the creaturely." Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 373-374.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Barth uses the example of Christ. He writes, "In strict analogy with the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ, what takes place in [humanity] by the revelation of God is this: his [or her] humanity is not impaired, but in the Word of God heard and believed by him [or her] he [or she] find the Lord, indeed in the strict and proper sense he [or she] find the subject of his humanity." Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 374.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 377.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Barth says, "How then can we for our part declare it to be necessary that we should be loved by [God]? It is, in fact, the free mercy and kindness of God which meets us in [God's] love. Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 379.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Barth remarks, "We cannot deny or hide the fact that in one way or another we all think we know already about human loving, and we continue to do so even when confronted by the fact of the love of God to us." Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 380.

being-singular's love only knows strength. Being-singular has nothing of its own to offer. Love cannot be forced. It cannot be the work of the self. One has to accept love. It has to work on one's behalf.¹⁰⁷⁰ One must move beyond one's own love. That is one's own love, including self-love, can only grow when it accepts the love of the other.¹⁰⁷¹ One gives up one's claim to love.¹⁰⁷²

In love one encounters a genuine partner. Describing this love, Barth writes, "Only of love to God can it be said that it has a genuine partner, for it is only in love to God that there is love to one's neighbor. For that reason only the love of God can be called real love."¹⁰⁷³ To be grasped by love is to be grasped by the genuine other. In the love of this genuine partner and other, one discovers the true meaning and purpose of love. Being-singular encounters one who wills to be loved.¹⁰⁷⁴ The genuine other does not demand or command love. The genuine other, one's true partner, comes fully. Love does not hold itself back. It is a complete giving of the self. Therefore the experience of love is an experience of the other's totality. The experience of love is neither theoretical nor philosophical. Love takes one into a full knowledge of the other. Love goes where

¹⁰⁷⁰ According to Barth, "We cannot offer a love which is the work of our own hands or heart. We have to recognize that that [God] intercedes for us and represents us, that what is our own, even our own love for [God], can never be anything but our shame and our curse." Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 384.

¹⁰⁷¹ "Self-love is built out of the love offered to us by others...Others must love us first, so that we can begin to love ourselves." Bauman, *Liquid Love*, 80.

¹⁰⁷² For example, Barth writes, "The love with which we reply to the love of God for us can begin and grow only when we go beyond what we can claim as our own love, when we recognize that we the unloving are beloved by [God]." Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 384.

¹⁰⁷³ Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 388.

¹⁰⁷⁴ As such, "it is the Lord who wills to be loved as the other." Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 388.

one's own knowledge cannot. Love takes one into the nature and being of the other. Love is a complete knowledge.¹⁰⁷⁵

In this knowledge, one sets aside the old self. The selfish self, being-singular, is left behind in order to embrace the true other.¹⁰⁷⁶ Being-singular was never one's true self. Being-singular is the self of separation. Instead to love, Barth writes, "means to become what we already are, those who are loved by [God]."¹⁰⁷⁷ In love's grasp one becomes what one already is, one becomes the living embodiment of love for the other. It is the passage from immature love to mature love. One loves freely and not out of compulsion.¹⁰⁷⁸

Love accepts the future. Being-singular has no future. It can only live within the self. As such, being-singular is trapped within itself. The self needs to embrace the other in order to grow. One's future lies outside the self. This is the paradox of the self, that one does not have control of one's own destiny. In order to discover one's true self, one has to search outside the self. Being-singular must seek the plural. It needs to live as being-with in order to have a future.¹⁰⁷⁹ To love the other is to live in the reality of

¹⁰⁷⁵ For example, Barth says, "The knowledge of the uniqueness of God is not the result of a philosophical consideration of the nature of God. It is the answer to [God's] revelation as the Lord. The philosophical consideration of the nature of God can never lead us beyond the dialectic of the concepts of monotheism and polytheism, pantheism and atheism." Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 389.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Barth writes, "It is only in the revelation of God as the Lord that the decision is made: I am the Lord thy God – I: not the idea of the unity of God, not the beings which want to be gods, not anything or everything which can be divine, not thou thyself in thine own divinity, but I – thou shalt have none other gods but me." Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 389.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 389.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Fromm clarifies the distinction between infantile/immature love and mature love. He writes, "Infantile love follows the principle: *'I love because I am loved.'* Mature love follows the principle: *'I am loved because I love.'* Immature love says: *'I love you because I need you.'* Mature love says: *'I need you because I love you'* [italics in the original]. " Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 40-41.

¹⁰⁷⁹ According to Barth, "In every case, therefore, love is an accepting, confirming and grasping of our future." Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 389.

God.¹⁰⁸⁰ The reality of God is a reality that puts others before the self. It is a reality that accepts love's grasp and the cut it places on the heart. The love for the other is the love of God.¹⁰⁸¹ The reality of God is being-singular-plural.

The Practice of Love

Foot washing is a movement of love.¹⁰⁸² Love is at the center of everything that occurs during foot washing. Humility, service, and forgiveness all originate in love. Love is the driving motivation for OFWBs.¹⁰⁸³ Foot washing has no greater purpose or drive than love. So when OFWBs wash feet, they are physically enacting this love. What cannot be said in words is said in action. What they say in action cannot be said in any other way. OFWB love is the love that seeks to challenge estrangement. Their love moves to overcome separation. Their love pushes against the power of sin. For OFWBs, the act of foot washing is love.¹⁰⁸⁴

¹⁰⁸⁰ Barth suggests that accepting "this future is identical with the reality of God, who in the most pregnant sense of the word is 'for us.' It is therefore an accepting, confirming and grasping of the God who is our future." Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 389-390.

¹⁰⁸¹ "If love, as distinct from the illusion of self-love, is love for another, and if this other is God the Lord, then our loving must be defined as the nature and attitude of [humanity]." Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: Second Half*, 390.

¹⁰⁸² This is a conclusion based on the gathered research. As explained earlier (see chapter 5, footnote 818) direct language will be used to describe the OFWB and their perspectives on foot washing. The OFWB perspective is nuanced and diverse. However, these direct statements represent the results of the author in conversation with OFWBs. Thus these statements are representations of the viewpoints of OFWBs. This is the author's attempt to re-present the viewpoints of OFWBs in a clear and concise manner. Therefore, as much as humanly possible, these viewpoints attempt to present as faithful representation of the OFWB experience as is possible. This is the "fruit" brought forth from the author entering into direct conversation with OFWBs.

¹⁰⁸³ Reflecting on his experience, a pastor explains, "What more beautiful metaphor of that is there than the servitude of bowing at a brother or sister's feet and saying, 'I love you in Christ and it's my privilege to serve you by washing feet.'" Interview with OFWB pastor (G), February 6, 2015.

¹⁰⁸⁴ A youth pastor explains what she has experienced concerning love. She says, "Because if there's someone that you're not, maybe you had a disagreement with or maybe you aren't seeing eye to eye on something or maybe not even talking with. If they're in the same room what better way to try to make amends then offering to wash their feet, and that's one reason why, like my husband's church, they actually, all go around after they've washed feet and hug each other and say I love you brother I love you sister. When you've had that kind of contact and interaction with another person it's kind of hard to sit there and argue at business meeting with each other." Interview with OFWB pastor (F), March 5, 2015.

In this OFWBs recognize something fundamentally important about the human condition. They recognize the real separation that exists between each individual. Foot washing is a way of connection. It is a way of overcoming the sin of separation. In this act OFWBs are essentially saying, “No” to estrangement. As such, despite its simplicity (or because of it) foot washing works at a deep level. In this act, OFWBs are acting out the overcoming of estrangement.¹⁰⁸⁵ It represents the conflict between loneliness and connection, despair and joy, and sin and love. OFWBs are crossing barriers when they practice foot washing. They cross the barriers that separate them. Physically they do this through touch, but more importantly, they do this emotionally. Their touch conveys more than physical connection. In that touch, at least briefly, sin is overcome. Isolation and despair, the fruits of sin, diminish. In their place, service and forgiveness, emerge. The self, being-singular, finally moves outward towards being-with. The needs of the self are replaced by the needs of the other.

Foot washing is a strange act, and yet life is strange. Life is disconnected, disjointed, and fragmented. It is fitting that a strange act, foot washing, finds its place in a strange world. For only a strange act can overcome a strange world. OFWBs embrace this strangeness through foot washing. They know that foot washing is going to make others hesitant. Foot washing does not fit into what is considered *acceptable* behavior.¹⁰⁸⁶

¹⁰⁸⁵ This overcoming of estrangement brings a renewed intimacy. A member describes this intimacy stating, “Intimacy is a closeness with my Christian family that express that with, participate in the foot washing with because you are bearing part of yourself that you don't normally bear to just anybody.” Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

¹⁰⁸⁶ A member shares that she realizes others consider foot washing strange. She shares, “I know that I've always experience, having grown up Free Will Baptist, I've always heard cleaning other people's feet as if it's some bizarre thing. It gives us a testimony that people are still doing that and people are taking the time to do it. And are not embarrassed to do it or ashamed to do it.” Interview with OFWB member (G), January 29, 2015.

Therefore foot washing is not something one is naturally inclined to do.¹⁰⁸⁷ It pushes and challenges the boundaries of the self. The boundaries that one desires to keep. Life bumps against life, but the self is defensive. Being-singular remains defensive even though it can feel the call toward the other. It is reminded each day of what unity and togetherness looks like. Estrangement desires that the strangeness remains. Estrangement convinces one of no need of others, that estrangement is *normal*. Kneeling and washing another's foot challenges estrangement.¹⁰⁸⁸ Foot washing challenges strangeness through strangeness. It uses what is strange in order to remind one that estrangement is strange. Thus foot washing is an embrace of uncomfortableness. It embraces the uncomfortable in order to make it normal.

Love brings together the strange. Strangeness is overcome in knowing the other. When OFWBs practice foot washing, there is a deep desire to know the other person. OFWBs come to know each other through touching, washing, drying, and embracing. Foot washing is knowledge of life beyond estrangement. It is a knowledge of reunion between the separated. In their love, OFWBs catch a glimpse of life without separation. They glimpse a life where estrangement does not the rule. They witness the reunion of

¹⁰⁸⁷ A pastor shares that in his experience "People shy away from it. Especially people who did not grow up Free Will Baptist and joined our church, because they think it's a little demeaning in some ways. I think we all do, but some do and we do at Blackjack we have our communion in the morning service and feet washing at night. When you say you're going to have a feet washing service your numbers are not going to be as large as you would on a normal Sunday night even though Sunday nights are not greatly attended but anyway. People have a little stigma about it." Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Explaining the effect kneeling and washing, a pastor shares, "I realized what an honor it is to be able to reach out to your brother, usually a brother in your church that you served together with, being able to kneel down in front of him and doing something you would think to be so lowly, but in reality it represents all what Christ is all about. Even if it means stooping low. You love one another, doing whatever it takes to love one another I guess." Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

being. In foot washing, at least for the moment, the cry of existence is satisfied. Foot washing is more than an embrace of the foot. It is an embrace of the total self.

Foot washing cuts the heart. It is an exposure of the self. Foot washing has to be, otherwise the action is impossible. Without love's cut, being-singular has no room for the other. OFWBs understand this. They understand that without love's cut their own being has no room for anyone else. The separation is too strong. The chasm that exists between the self and the other cannot be crossed under one's own strength. Being-with cannot be forced. One needs to be cut, exposed, and broken. OFWBs are broken in foot washing. OFWBs are broken each time they kneel and wash another's feet. Love breaks their hearts, and yet they rise as renewed people. They rise not as being-singular, but as being-singular-plural. OFWBs rise together.

Foot washing breaks down the things that being-singular considers important. Things such as class, race, status, job, age, and so on are cut and broken. In their place humility, service, and forgiveness are allowed to grow. This cut has to return again and again. This is why OFWB continually practice foot washing. It is their reminder that love's cut should never be allowed closed.¹⁰⁸⁹ It is their check against power and selfishness. Power and selfishness, the fruits of sin, are pushed away so that they can be grasped by love.

Grace as Acceptance

Love for the other, love that models the reality of God, is the love of acceptance. It is love that accepts the other totally and completely. Living in the reality of God is

¹⁰⁸⁹ Love should continue to grow. Love never ceases its transformation upon the individual. A pastor shares, "I think the experience of washing feet too is an experience of growing in Christ and growing in love for your fellow believers. It teaches us how we love unconditionally sometimes...I think that's what it would teach." Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

living in the state of grace. Grace, Tillich writes, “Is the *reunion* of life with life, the *reconciliation* of the self with itself. Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected. [italics in the original]”¹⁰⁹⁰ Love is a reunion, but it is more than that. Love is an acceptance of the rejected. Separation is a rejection. In being-singular, the self rejects the other. Being-singular pushes back against the other in order to retreat inward. There is thus a mutual rejection of being. Life lived in the singular is a life lived in rejection, rejection of the other and the self. However, in grace rejection is turned into acceptance.

Grace accepts in spite of sin. Grace is the in-spite-of element that loves even when love seems to be impossible.¹⁰⁹¹ Grace appears when sin, separation, is at its strongest. Grace appears when the gulf of separation appears insurmountable. Grace does not diminish in the presence of sin, instead it increases.¹⁰⁹² Grace cannot exist without sin, thus to live grace is to live in the knowledge of separation. One is continually pulled towards separation. Grace reminds one that one is accepted. In a life of acceptance, despair and loneliness never have the last word. The temptation to retreat inward never disappears. Despair and loneliness live at the edge of existence awaiting their return.

Being-singular-plural is impossible without grace. One cannot accept another without first being accepted. Acceptance of oneself and others cannot be forced.¹⁰⁹³ This

¹⁰⁹⁰ Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 158.

¹⁰⁹¹ Tillich writes, “There is something triumphant in the word ‘grace’: in spite of the abounding of sin grace abounds much more.” Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 158.

¹⁰⁹² Tillich uses the example of Christ. He writes that in Christ’s “greatest separation from other [people], from himself and God, he found himself accepted in spite of his being rejected. And when he found that he was accepted, he was able to accept himself and to be reconciled to others.” Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 162.

¹⁰⁹³ For Rahner, “[One] experiences [oneself] at the same time as a subject who experiences the event of God’s absolute self-communication, as a subject who has already responded in freedom with a ‘yes’ or ‘not’ to this event, and who can never bring the concrete and real mode of [one’s] response to the level of reflection completely.” Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 133.

is the trap of sin. Sin leads one to believe that one can never be accepted or accept others. Being-singular has no strength of its own to overcome loneliness and despair.¹⁰⁹⁴ Grace needs to act first. Grace comes before love's grasp, before love's cut across the heart, and before reunion. It is the source of love.

The grasp of grace comes when least expected. Grace, Tillich writes, "strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual."¹⁰⁹⁵ In those dark moments, according to Tillich, the light of grace appears in order to tell one that "*You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know."¹⁰⁹⁶

Grace makes relation with others possible. It is the foundation of being-singular-plural. Grace is the experience of relationship. It truly is, as Tillich explains, the "reunion of life with life."¹⁰⁹⁷ Therefore grace is never a singular experience. It is not a feeling of enlightenment, personal transcendence, or wisdom. Grace does not come to serve the *I*. It comes to build the *we*. This is the miracle of grace. It is the miracle of finally coming to understand the other and knowing them fully. In grace one comes to know the whole person, both the good and bad. Thus one comes to understand the other in their complexity.¹⁰⁹⁸

¹⁰⁹⁴ Tillich says, "We cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transformed by that stroke of grace. It happens; or it does not happen. And certainly it does *not* happen if we try to force it upon ourselves, just as it shall not happen so long as we think, in our self-complacency, that we have no need of it." Tillich, "You Are Accepted," 163.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Tillich, "You Are Accepted," 163.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Tillich, "You Are Accepted," 163.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Tillich, "You Are Accepted," 164.

¹⁰⁹⁸ According to Tillich, "We experience the grace of understanding each other's words. We understand not merely the literal meaning of the words, but also that which lies behind them, even when they are harsh or angry." Tillich, "You Are Accepted," 164.

The experience of grace is the experience of hope. It is the hope for a better world. A world built on being-with rather than being-singular. Grace is the hope for reunion of life to life. It is the experience, Tillich writes, “which is able to overcome the tragic separation of the sexes, of the generations, of the nations, of the races, and even the utter strangeness between [humanity] and nature.”¹⁰⁹⁹ In grace one is finally able to say *yes* to the other and *yes* to oneself. One accepts and is accepted.¹¹⁰⁰ In acceptance, grace points one towards life in community.

The Grace in Practice

There is nothing mystical or magical about washing feet. It does not connect to a heavenly reality, nor does it solicit a spiritual presence. Matter is not physically or spiritually changed. For all intents and purposes, though strange, foot washing is utterly mundane. Foot washing, at least for those OFWBs who practice it, is about acceptance. OFWBs say *yes* to one another when washing feet. It is all about the *yes* of acceptance. This is why foot washing is emotional for OFWBs. It is the feeling of being accepted by another.

The *yes* of acceptance is the OFWB experience of grace. Foot washing prepares OFWBs for the reality of grace. It does not solicit or control grace. Grace comes or it does not. However, foot washing does prepare one so that the *yes* of grace can be experienced.¹¹⁰¹ Not all OFWBs experience the grasp of grace. Often the experience of

¹⁰⁹⁹ Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 164.

¹¹⁰⁰ Tillich maintains that “it happens that we receive the power to say ‘yes’ to ourselves, that peace enters into us and makes us whole, that self-hate and self-contempt disappear, and that our self is reunited with itself. Then we can say grace has come upon us.” Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” 165.

¹¹⁰¹ Foot washing is an act of grace. A member shares, “It’s driven me to my knees more. It makes appreciate more what Christ did for us. It also makes me thankful. It’s not something that I’m proud I’m just thankful and I think there’s a difference between. It took me awhile to learn that. I’ll be candid with you. It

foot washing depends on what one brings to it.¹¹⁰² One has to have the right attitude.¹¹⁰³ It is easy to retreat back into the singular self. The strangeness and intimacy of foot washing prevents many from participating. Even still, the actions do not always facilitate an overcoming of separation. Washing feet does not guarantee an experience of humility, service, and forgiveness. Love can fail to cut across the heart. Without that cut, the heart fails to make room for the other. Being-singular can do the actions and remain being-singular. Foot washing is not magic.

It does not mean that meaning is absent from the practice. Foot washing carries the hope of grace. Foot washing is a practice filled with potential. Meaning is present within the practice. It does not have to be solicited from afar. In foot washing, the *yes* of acceptance is already there. Unfortunately the state of sin distorts one's perspective. One cannot see the other beyond the self. Sin prevents one from seeing across that chasm. Therefore, unless one can see the other, the *yes* will never come. Foot washing puts one before the other. One encounters the other face to face and touch to touch. As such, this encounter prepares one for grace. Through physical touch it is hoped that one will finally see grace and be grasped by it.

Foot washing opens OFWBs to the experience of grace and to one another. OFWBs know that foot washing's influence is subtle. It is not easy to overcome estrangement. Loneliness and despair are powerful enemies. Foot washing carries the hope of grace. It carries the hope that estrangement is not forever. It carries the hope that

also makes me feel very blessed, very blessed and wholly inadequate. It's nothing that I did for my salvation." Interview with OFWB member (C), June 30, 2015.

¹¹⁰² A member suggests that one must "[d]o it with an open spirit with an open heart." Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

¹¹⁰³ This same member goes on to state, "You have to do it. Yeah. I think it's not just okay going and sitting and watching. You have to be willing to wash someone's feet, but more than that you have to be willing to have your feet washed." Interview with OFWB member (D), February 5, 2015.

the other will not always remain a stranger. Foot washing hopes for community. The *yes* of acceptance is also the *yes* of community. By washing feet, OFWBs hope that grace will lead to love, love will lead to acceptance, and acceptance will lead to community.

Towards Community

The outcome of love and grace is community, however, community is both a birth and death. It holds within itself the paradox of both life and death. Community is birthed from death, and the *I* must die in order for it to begin. According to Nancy, “Community is revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to others. Community is what takes place always through others and for others.”¹¹⁰⁴ Community cannot begin in the *I*. Community reveals itself through others. Specifically, it is born out of the death of others. Community does begin as a coming together of the *I*'s. If it were, the *I* would have nothing to lose. The *I* keeps itself and gains the *we*. Nancy writes that community “is not a project of fusion.”¹¹⁰⁵ It is not the *I*'s self-glorification into a higher state of being, namely *we*. Unless the *I* dies, community will always begin with the *I*. It will have the power to create and cease community. The *I* will rule over the *we*. Therefore community cannot begin with the *I*.

Community begins with the other. It is born out of the death of the *I*. Community does the impossible. It brings life out of death.¹¹⁰⁶ Total fusion between individuals is impossible. The *I* can never cross the barrier that separates it from the other. The *I* needs to lose itself by embracing its finitude. This creates an impossible predicament for the *I*,

¹¹⁰⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor *et al.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 15.

¹¹⁰⁵ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 15.

¹¹⁰⁶ “Community occurs in order to acknowledge this impossibility, or more exactly – for there is neither function nor finality here – the impossibility of making a work out of death is inscribe and acknowledge as ‘community.’” Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 15.

for the *I* must face its own death if it is to ever be anything else. The *I* has no future on its own. It is not eternal. Nancy insists that the *I* must face “the finitude and the irredeemable excess that make up finite being: its death, but also its birth, and only the community can present me my birth.”¹¹⁰⁷ The death of the *I* is not the end. In its death the other is found. Community reveals to the *I* an existence outside the self.¹¹⁰⁸ It opens and expands one’s world toward new possibilities and experiences.

Community exposes and embraces finitude. It does not erase or absorb finitude. That is community does expose the *I*, in its finitude, in order to assimilate it.¹¹⁰⁹ Instead, as Nancy says, “*Community does not sublimate the finitude it exposes. Community itself, in sum, is nothing but this exposition* [italics in the original].” Community wears its finitude proudly. It holds it and cherishes it, because community is finitude. Community does not pretend to be something it is not. It does not replace finitude with the infinite. Community is not embarrassed of its finitude. It does not brush aside the finite or attempt to replace it with something else. Finitude is the human experience, in all of its ambiguities, contradictions, and shortcoming. Thus denial of these things is a denial of one’s humanity. Therefore Nancy writes that “finitude alone is communitarian.”¹¹¹⁰ Finitude communicates, reaches out, precisely because it is limited. In order to survive, finitude depends on others. As opposed to the infinite, finitude cannot be self-sufficient. Finitude needs the other. The individual, on the other hand, believes itself to be

¹¹⁰⁷ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 15.

¹¹⁰⁸ Nancy claims that “what community reveals to me, in presenting to me my birth and my death, is my existence outside myself.” Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 26.

¹¹⁰⁹ “*Community does not sublimate the finitude it exposes. Community itself, in sum, is nothing but this exposition* [italics in the original].” Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 26.

¹¹¹⁰ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 27

infinite.¹¹¹¹ Therefore the infinite is closed and requires nothing from the other. Community, wishing to remain open, is not caught off guard by finitude and its limitations. Instead, limitations are surrounded and brought into community itself.¹¹¹² The individual, as infinite, cannot live in community. Only the singular being, being-as-finitude, can live in community. Singular being lives as the embodiment of finitude, its limitations and shortcomings. The singular being is not the individual. The individual lives under the illusion that it is infinite. Even in contact with the other, the individual lives for itself. The singular being, on the other hand, comes into itself in the presence of another being.¹¹¹³ The singular being appears in the presence of the other. It appears as finitude itself and shares that finitude with the other. Singular being shares its finitude, therefore, community is the sharing of finitude. It is the realm of the singular being's journey towards being-in-common.¹¹¹⁴

Community cannot exist without sharing finitude. Community cannot exist without the other.¹¹¹⁵ It cannot be a community of the *I*'s, the individual, otherwise it would be a farce. A community of *I*'s is a mock community. The community of the *I* rejects the other in preference for itself. Community cannot be based on rejection, even if that rejection is shared.

¹¹¹¹ Nancy writes, "As an individual, I am closed off from all community, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that the individual – if an absolutely individual being could ever exist – is infinite." Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 27.

¹¹¹² For example, Nancy explains that the "limit of the individual, fundamentally, does not concern [community], it simply surrounds it." Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 27.

¹¹¹³ According to Nancy, "A singular being *appears*, as finitude itself: at the end (or at the beginning), with the contact of the skin (or the heart) of another singular being." Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 27-28.

¹¹¹⁴ Being-in-common, according to Nancy, "does not mean a higher form of substance or subject taking charge of the limits of separate individualities." Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 27.

¹¹¹⁵ "Community means, consequently, that there is not singular being without another singular being." Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 28.

True community is the community of mutual exposure. Thus singular beings extend themselves in mutual sharing of exposure. Singular beings expose themselves to the outside, in the reality of the other.¹¹¹⁶ Community is based on this exposure, and thus communication, of one's finitude. Therefore, community cannot be created or produced. It can only be experienced. If community could be created, it would belong to the *I*'s. Community could be claimed.¹¹¹⁷ It is turned into a thing to be used.

Community does not belong to the group. Its origin does not come from the self. The origin of the community, Nancy writes, is "the tracing of the borders upon which or along which singular beings are exposed."¹¹¹⁸ Community arises out of the exposure of being to being. It comes out limits of being, not from being-itself. The *I*, singular being, has no claim upon community. It does not belong to a *he, she, it, or they*. Instead community's origin comes from the ways in which the singular is broken. Broken for whom? The singular is broken for the other. Therefore, community originates in the ways that the singular experiences the other. Community begins when the singular and other can share identity.¹¹¹⁹ It begins when all singulars become others.

Community lives in the resistance of being to being. In this sense community is difficult. There is nothing easy about shared identity. The singular actively works against community, and may even create its own version of community. The singular resists the

¹¹¹⁶ Nancy writes, "This outside is in its turn nothing other than the exposition of another areality, of another singularity – the same other." Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 29.

¹¹¹⁷ Nancy explains, "Community is not the work of singular beings, nor can it claim them as its works, just as communication is not a work or even an operation of singular beings, for community is simply their being – their being suspended upon its limit." Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 31.

¹¹¹⁸ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 33.

¹¹¹⁹ Nancy defines community as "that singular ontological order in which the other and the same are alike (*sont le semblable*): that is to say, in the sharing of identity." Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 34.

immanence of the other. Community does not do away with resistance, nor does it overcome it. Community is resistance.¹¹²⁰ The sharing of identity is not about transcending resistance. There will always be that urge to escape from other, even in the closest of communities.¹¹²¹ Community struggles within the resistance, because the work of community is never complete. It struggles against itself over and over again. Therefore community is never fully established. Community cannot exist apart from resistance. If resistance were to cease so would community. A community without resistance would represent something false or imaginary. It would create the illusion of unity. A unity without resistance is no true unity for there is nothing to be overcome. Community ought to have that *in spite of* element in order to exist. It requires courage, but not the courage of strength. It is the courage of letting go. That is of letting go of the self, the *I*, in favor of the other.

Community in Practice

The ideal community is neither the unattainable community nor the perfect community. The ideal community is the *un-ideal* community. The *un-ideal* community is the imperfect community, the work-in-progress community. But work-in-progress towards what? It is certainly not perfection, nor is it transcendence. The goal of community is not to run away towards some perfect transcendent ideal. The community, Nancy declares, “Is the sacred...but the sacred stripped of the sacred.”¹¹²² This community, the *un-ideal* community, is anything but sacred. For if by sacred one means

¹¹²⁰ Or as Nancy puts it, “Community is, in a sense, resistance itself: namely, resistance to immanence.” Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 35.

¹¹²¹ This resistance to immanence, Nancy explains, is “resistance to the communion of everyone or to the exclusive passion of one or several: to all the forms and all the violences of subjectivity.” Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 35.

¹¹²² Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 35.

set apart, then the sacred has to be rejected. If by sacred one means the *shared* community,¹¹²³ then by all means one should call the community sacred.

The sacred community is *not* the set apart community. But as the shared community, community is the visible manifestation of presence. The goal of community is not perfection but the living presence of a continually face to face encounter with the other. The OFWB community is not a model of the perfect community. The OFWBs make no claim that their community is anymore special or set apart than other Christian communities. Foot washing does *not* set apart OFWBs, nor should it. What purpose is there to set apart OFWBs? If the goal of foot washing was setting apart, separation, then it would be a practice in vanity. Foot washing would be a farce, a mockery of itself. What OFWBs do is unique and unusual, but in no way is it meant to set them apart.

OFWBs are uncomfortable with the idea of being unique or special because of foot washing.¹¹²⁴ They lack a clear consensus on what this practice means for their identity. This is not due to a lack of OFWB reflection on foot washing. Foot washing is an important part of their OFWB history and heritage. It is something they highly value, but it does not set them apart. OFWBs do not see foot washing as something that sets them apart, instead it is something that they *share*. Foot washing is *shared* with all.¹¹²⁵ It is a future shared in imperfection.

¹¹²³ Nancy writes, “For the sacred – the separated, the set apart – no longer proves to be the haunting idea of an unattainable communion, but is rather made up of nothing other than the sharing of community.” Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 35.

¹¹²⁴ A pastor speaks about the OFWB and its identity as related to foot washing. He says, “Well we’re not the only denomination that washes feet. But many times when you say your Free Will Baptist they say you’re that foot washing group or something. I don’t think it should make us unique, I think it should make us glad that we’re children of God and love others like he loved us and we love ourselves.” Interview with OFWB pastor (E), March 27, 2015.

¹¹²⁵ Speaking of this shared experience, a pastor explains, “It’s a shared experience. [Describing how they wash feet where one washes another and vice versa] afterwards there’s an embrace that brings

Foot washing is an embrace of the imperfection all beings share. It does not shy away from what makes one uncomfortable. Foot washing thrusts one towards an encounter with the imperfect, the flawed, and the damaged. Foot washing typifies what it means to be human. It points to what is real about individuals, not the personas one wears for others. Washing feet is a collision of finitude. It is hard to hide one's imperfections and blemishes when washing another's feet. This is more than an uncomfortableness with feet, though this can be part of it. The exposure of feet is an exposure of the self. One is placing one's finitude into the hands of another. The giving of the foot is a giving of finitude. It tells the other that one is indeed *human*. One gives humanity and the other accepts it. The *I* gives itself to the *we*.

This is what OFWBs give to one another. In reality, the feet are secondary.¹¹²⁶ It was never about the feet. The feet are the conduct and means for something much more important. Foot washing is about the sharing of imperfection and finitude. OFWBs share the same insecurities about their feet and bodies as many others do. The feet do not that matter. What matters is the sharing of the self. The practice feels real and genuine because it embodies and shares one's finitude. The OFWB readily admit that they fight and disagree, and hold grudges against one another. Yet, OFWBs also laugh, fellowship and have fun. This is especially true around homecomings and potlucks. OFWBs fight, but they also learn how to forgive. They learn how to show humility and love to one

together and there's a literally conversation of "Thank you brother I appreciate all you do. You meant this much to me." It's a unifying thing once you let it." Interview with OFWB pastor (H), February 3, 2015.

¹¹²⁶ A member and deacon declares, "It's our feet, but it's still a symbol of the heart being purified. Because it's just a humble significance of what Jesus did to his disciples and he said do as I have done you. Again I don't necessarily think the actual act of feet washing is, it's being a servant. We're to serve, not wait for somebody to pat us on the back and say what a good singer you are or good preacher you are or good deacon you are. That's not what our job is. Our job is to set an example of humbleness and servitude." Interview with OFWB member (F), March 17, 2015.

another. For many, this originates in foot washing.¹¹²⁷ In foot washing, OFWBs learn how to share their finitude.

Sharing finitude is not easy for OFWBs. There is resistance, but this resistance makes community. The struggles and joys that typify communal existence are on full display during foot washing. Foot washing brings to light the communal imperfection. It does not hide them away, rather it brings them to light. Foot washing is the catalyst towards a shared community. Shared imperfection and finitude points towards a shared identity. OFWB share one another's finitude. They share imperfection. Thus the OFWB identity is an identity based not on what could be. The OFWB identity is based on what *is*. Foot washing is an encounter with the real. It is this reality, the reality of Christ, which is the basis of OFWB community.

The reality of Christ is the reality of the other. In this there should be no difference between the secular and Christian community. Both are a yearning and struggle for the other. In community, the other is a source of strength. They share the same future. Community, if it is to exist, ought to be founded on an experience of the other. It needs to be founded on a shared finitude, therefore community places its future in the *we* rather than the *I*. Through foot washing, the OFWB practice a community based on the *we*. In foot washing the *I* forgoes itself for the sake of the *we*. In this foot washing builds for the future. It builds for a future of shared imperfection, finitude, and identity.

¹¹²⁷ And ultimately to Jesus. OFWBs learn through the love and service. OFWBs love through service. As a pastor puts it, [Foot washing] reminds [us] of what it means to truly believe in Christ and to be the body of Christ in our world. Because it teaches us those about the humility of Christ and that we need to humble ourselves, and it teaches us again that Jesus came into the world to serve and not be served and that's what he's calling us to do. It's not serving ourselves it's serving people, not only the church but the other community." Interview with OFWB pastor (I), February 2, 2015.

Christ the Other, Christ the Community

Bonhoeffer writes that “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ... We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.”¹¹²⁸ Christ becomes the source of connection between the self and the other, though it is much more than that. Christ does not simply connect one to the other. Christ is the urge of love that drives the self, the *I*, toward the other.¹¹²⁹ Christ becomes the other in order to direct one outside the self. As a result, the self sees the other as the source of one’s salvation. For the Christian Christ becomes the living embodiment of the other.¹¹³⁰ Christ and the other are one and the same. In seeking the other, one is also seeking Christ. Each other, all persons, become an other-in-Christ. Because, Bonhoeffer writes, Christ took “our being, our nature, ourselves... Now we are in him. Where he is, there we are too, in the incarnation, on the Cross, and in his resurrection. We belong to him because we are in him.”¹¹³¹

The other becomes Christ, and Christ is the other. The other becomes the foundation of community precisely because the other is Christ. In opening the self towards others, one is by implication opening oneself towards Christ. The other strives for the other, Christ strives for Christ, and community is born. Community is thus born

¹¹²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 21.

¹¹²⁹ According to Bonhoeffer, a community in and through Christ means “first, that Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity.” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 21.

¹¹³⁰ Bonhoeffer makes the case that the “Christian is the man who no longer seeks his [or her] salvation, his [or her] deliverance, his [or her] justification in himself [or herself], but in Jesus Christ alone.” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 21-22.

¹¹³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 24.

and subsists through the person of Christ.¹¹³² In turn, the other ceases to be the other and becomes a brother or sister.¹¹³³ In community the other loses *otherness*. One ceases to be defined as the other, as different. In Christ, *otherness* is replaced with *togetherness* or being-with. Repeated exposure to the other furthers strengthens the bond between the self and the other. Estrangement cannot be completely overcome. There still exists a barrier between individuals. As the other ceases to be other, not once but repeatedly, that barrier becomes less challenging. The deeper the bond the easier it is for individuals to transverse the barrier. The journey becomes a well-trodden path. Christ makes that path clearer and more familiar.¹¹³⁴

The bridge between others is built on Christ and his work. Christ, the quintessential other, forms the path between one and another. Christ takes on *otherness*, freeing individuals from the burden of being estranged. The feeling of *otherness* is replaced by *togetherness* through the work of Christ. Christ not only becomes the bridge, Christ is the light to the other side. Christ allows one to see the other, to touch and feel the other, precisely because Christ is that other. Christ replaces the *I*, being-singular, so that one can be being-with.

¹¹³² Community is founded on the work of Christ. Bonhoeffer claims that “community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us.” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 25.

¹¹³³ Bonhoeffer explains, “One is a brother [or sister] to another only through Jesus Christ. I am a brother [or sister] to another person through what Jesus Christ did for me and to me; the other person has become a brother [or sister] to me through what Jesus Christ did for him [or her].” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 25.

¹¹³⁴ Community helps to ease the burden between the self and the other. The path becomes more familiar the deeper the relationship. Bonhoeffer writes that the “more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us.” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 26.

Christ is the foundation of community, and every other becomes bound by the work of Christ as one community. It is a foundation that has already been prepared.¹¹³⁵ There is a way out of estrangement, otherwise all would be left to despair. The way out is not easy to see, especially if one goes it alone. The status of estrangement convinces one that the way out is a matter of personal fortitude, but being-singular demands connection. It makes demands of the other. The individual, as being-singular, traverses estrangement with its own idea and vision. Being-singular attempts to establish community under its own name. Its community is founded on the self rather than the other. A community of the self cannot be a community of Christ. Christ-the-other is Christ-the-community. A community built on the selfish desire of the individual, being-singular, is doomed to fail.¹¹³⁶

Community is a gift. It cannot be claimed as one's own.¹¹³⁷ As a gift, community has to be received in order to grow.¹¹³⁸ It is not something one takes for granted. Genuine connection with the other is not something one takes lightly. Community is a daily gift. It is a reminder that one is not alone. This gift is a reminder of the reality in which all

¹¹³⁵ According to Bonhoeffer, "God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demander but as thankful recipients." Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 28.

¹¹³⁶ A community built on anything other than the other cannot stand. Bonhoeffer writes, "The man [or woman] who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, by himself [or herself]. He [or she] enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and [God] accordingly. He [or she] stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren. He [or she] acts as if he [or she] is the creator of the Christian community, as if his [or her] dream binds [people] together." Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 27-28.

¹¹³⁷ Bonhoeffer declares, "Christian community is like the Christian's sanctification. It is a gift of God which we cannot claim." Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 30. Bonhoeffer here is writing about Christian communities. One can make the claim that any community, Christian or otherwise, is a gift. Any genuine community is a gift.

¹¹³⁸ For example, Bonhoeffer writes that the "more thankfully we daily receive what is given to use, the more surely and steadily will fellowship increase and grow from day to day as God pleases. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 30.

beings are called to participate. Bonhoeffer writes that this is a reality “created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”¹¹³⁹ It is the reality of the other and for the other. This is the reality of Christ whereby all people are invited. It is the reality of ultimate openness. As such, no one is excluded. It is a reality where no other remains an other for Christ has already become other for all.

The community of the other is built on service for the other. True community sees hope in the other rather than the self. The community of the other loves the other for the sake of the other. True community loves others for the sake of Christ.¹¹⁴⁰ That is they love others for the other’s own sake. The love of desire is replaced by the love of truth.¹¹⁴¹ Truth here does not mean a proposition or law, nor is it a cold and disconnected propositional truth. The truth of the community is not from above, it comes from within. It is the truth that others matter more than the self. It is the truth that each person is valuable, and that value directly impacts each person in a shared existence. It is the truth that being-singular-plural, being-with, is the destiny of every person. Desire takes but truth gives.

The community of Christ-the-other, is the community of *all* others. A community of exclusion is a community that excludes Christ. One cannot control the identity or status of the other. A genuine encounter with the other, a true encounter, is an encounter that places no conditions on who can be that other.¹¹⁴² For who can put preconditions on

¹¹³⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 30.

¹¹⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer writes, “Human love is directed to the other person for his [or her] own sake, spiritual love loves him [or her] for Christ’s sake.” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 34.

¹¹⁴¹ Or as Bonhoeffer describes it, “Human love lives by uncontrolled and uncontrollable dark desires; spiritual love lives in the clear light of service ordered by the *truth*.” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 37.

¹¹⁴² According to Bonhoeffer, “The exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from a Christian community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ; in the poor brother [or sister] Christ is knocking at the door.” Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 38.

the other and expect a community of truth, a community of Christ? The other must be unexpected. Unfortunately otherness is often replaced by sameness, whereby an encounter with the other is forced to meet a criteria or standard. No demands should be placed on the other, for this is tantamount to putting demands on Christ. A community that excludes risks excluding Christ-the-other. Without Christ community cannot exist. Therefore a community that excludes is not a true community. It excludes is very foundation, Christ, without who community has no future.

The Other and the Community of God

Christ-the-other is the reality of God. Bonhoeffer writes, “The *subject matter of a Christian ethic is God reality revealed in Christ becoming real among God’s creatures* [italics in the original].”¹¹⁴³ The reality of God is revealed in the reality of the other. God becomes real in the presence of others rather than the self. The experience of God is based upon an experience of the *we*. In the other (Christ) one experiences the good (God). The good cannot be abstracted from reality, for it is only in reality that one can find the good.¹¹⁴⁴ The reality of the good is the reality of God.¹¹⁴⁵ They are one and the same. To find the good one needs to find the other. Therefore the journey towards God is a journey towards the other (Christ). Bonhoeffer explains, “Only by participating in reality do we also share in the good.”¹¹⁴⁶

¹¹⁴³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6: Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 49.

¹¹⁴⁴ “Good is the real itself.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 50.

¹¹⁴⁵ Good, according to Bonhoeffer, is “not the abstractly real that is separated from the reality of God, but the real that has its reality only in God. Good is never without this reality.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 50.

¹¹⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 51.

Only by participation in reality can one experience God. The individual and society can only be separated in abstraction.¹¹⁴⁷ The reality of the situation is that the individual cannot be split from society. Estrangement convinces one that one's estrangement is in fact real. More importantly, estrangement blinds one to reality. In estrangement one can only see the self. Sin separates one from the reality of the other and therefore the reality of God. God is not found in the self, the *I*. This abstracts God from the lived conditions of life. God is found in the reality of the other.

The good is the reality of God. It is a reality that cannot be separated from human existence. Thus the good encompasses all aspects of human behavior and action. The good, found in human action, is embraced by God as the reality of God. Humans, Bonhoeffer writes, "with their motives and their works, with their fellow humans, with the creation that surrounds them...reality as a whole held in the hands of God – that is what is embraced by the question of the good."¹¹⁴⁸ The good is not separated from human action. This is not to say that works predicate the good. Works does not create the good for that would be tantamount to creating the reality of God. Rather, human action, behavior, and experience is where the good resides. The good resides in the other. God resides in the reality of the other. The good is experienced in the experience of others. As such the good relates to the whole person, the whole other. This embrace of other is the embrace of the whole and indivisible person. Human beings, all others, are themselves

¹¹⁴⁷ Or as Bonhoeffer explains, "The split between individual and society that is expressed here [referring to Reinhold Niebuhr's concepts of moral human and immoral society] is just as abstract as that between person and work. What is inseparable is here torn apart, and each part, which by itself is dead, is examined separately." Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 51.

¹¹⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 53.

complete indivisible wholes as both individuals and community.¹¹⁴⁹ This wholeness is established in God.¹¹⁵⁰

Good relates to the whole person. As such the good is a reality of *real* rather than the *abstractly* real. Good relates to what actually occurs in the everyday experience of individuals working together and towards community. The good is found in the struggle, the resistance, between being-singular and being-singular-plural. The resistance includes all aspects of being human. The struggle between the self and the social is the struggle. Therefore the good is part of the struggle. How does one experience the good? The good is experienced in the reality, the resistance, of the other. The good is the shared struggle with the other. It is the shared struggle in the reality of Christ.

The good is the participation of the whole self into the reality of God.¹¹⁵¹ The good participates in the reality of God, and the reality of God is the good. They are one and the same. This good, the reality of God, is not abstracted from the reality of humanity. Both realities interpenetrate one another so that the reality of God is found in the reality of humanity. Therefore, the reality of humanity is the reality of God. The good is found neither above nor below it, but rather within it. As Bonhoeffer explains, “Good here does not consist of an impossible ‘realization,’ i.e., making real something that is unreal; it is not a realization of ethical ideas. Rather, reality itself teaches what is good.”¹¹⁵² Good only understood as an ideal or an ethic is the good of the self. Being-

¹¹⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer says, “*Human beings are indivisible wholes, not only as individuals in both their person and work, but also as members of the human and created community to which they belong* [italics in the original].” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 53.

¹¹⁵⁰ According to Bonhoeffer, “It is this indivisible whole, that is, this reality grounded and recognized in God, that the question of good has in view.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 53.

¹¹⁵¹ Bonhoeffer says, “*To participate in the indivisible whole of God’s reality is the meaning of the Christian question about the good* [italics in the original].” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 53.

¹¹⁵² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 54.

singular strives to create ideals or ethics. It seeks the source of the good within the self. The good becomes a matter of the *I* rather than the *we*. It is a created good. The good cannot be created or destroyed because it is the reality of God. The reality of God is the reality of humanity.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the life of Christ. Christ is the physical manifestation of this interpenetration between the reality of God and the reality of humanity. Because Christ entered the reality of humanity, God (the good) and humanity are forever bound to one another. Christ is the bound between these two realities. They are held together through and by Christ.¹¹⁵³ Christ is the reality of God and the reality of humanity together as one. Therefore, Bonhoeffer says, “All concepts of reality that ignore Jesus Christ are abstractions.”¹¹⁵⁴ Neither reality can be viewed on its own. There is no reality of God outside the reality of humanity, and there is no reality of humanity without the reality of God. In Christ one participates in both.¹¹⁵⁵

One cannot see how reality (humanity and God) function on their own. As such, the actions of God and humanity are bound to each other. One cannot look at human action, ritual or otherwise, without also looking at the action of God. There is neither a human nor divine ethic on its own. There is only the ethic of Christ. The work of Christ is the work of God and humanity together. This God-Humanity reality is the ultimate realization of being-singular-plural. In Christ these realities are reconciled to one another. The estrangement, the barrier of sin, between the two is overcome. Because of

¹¹⁵³ According to Bonhoeffer, “*In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world. The place where the questions about the reality of God and about the reality of the world are answered at the same time is characterized solely by the name: Jesus Christ. God and the world are enclosed in this name.*” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 54.

¹¹⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 54.

¹¹⁵⁵ Or as Bonhoeffer describes it, “In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other.” *Ethics*, 55.

this reconciliation, thus the question moving forward is no longer how one reality works with the other. Instead, the most pertinent question is how this God-Humanity reality works today. The work of Christ is the work of the here and now. It is the experience of both realities working as one.¹¹⁵⁶ Through Christ, contemporary problems, concerns, actions, and work are the concerns of both God and humanity.

The reality of God and the reality of humanity, God-humanity, should not be split. A division between God and humanity creates the unhelpful distinction of a sacred and profane realities. The sacred dominates the profane. The profane becomes inferior to the sacred. It is a relationship built on the wrong type of resistance. It is a resistance of the strong over the weak. The sacred and the profane have nothing to do with one another. As such, one is called to make a choice between one and the other. One may choose to abandon the world for the sake of the sacred or choose to forsake the sacred for the profane. Yet there is a third choice. One may attempt to stay in both through one's own strength.¹¹⁵⁷ The *I* is torn apart by its own strength. Instead of God in and with humanity, God is over and above humanity.

The God-humanity reality is one. This one reality is the Christ-reality. In Christ one moves beyond the static distinctions between God and the world. Instead, in Christ, there is one dynamic reality that includes all the work of God in and through Christ. The sacred and profane lose all meaning as both are incorporated into one Christ-reality, a

¹¹⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer writes, "What matters is *participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today*, and doing so in such a way that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God." Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 55.

¹¹⁵⁷ When reality is split, Bonhoeffer writes, "either we place ourselves in one of the two realms, wanting Christ without the world or the world without Christ – and in both cases we deceive ourselves. Or we try to stand in the two realms and the same time, thereby becoming people in eternal conflict." Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 58.

true being-with or being-singular-plural.¹¹⁵⁸ Being-singular no longer has the ability to stand on its own in such a reality. The Christ-reality is the reality of acceptance. It is the reality where the sacred and profane are both accepted as one through Christ.¹¹⁵⁹ In this reality, the work of God is fulfilled in the actions of human beings.¹¹⁶⁰ Therefore there is unity rather than opposition.¹¹⁶¹ The sacred and the profane cease to be in the Christ-reality. The Christ-reality is one reality, and so embraces the world. One cannot escape the reality of humanity by running towards the reality of God. Yet this is exactly the type of scenario created when these realities are put in static opposition. The Christianity of static opposition is a Christian that flees from the world. Such a Christianity, Bonhoeffer writes, “falls prey to unnaturalness, irrationality, triumphalism, and arbitrariness.”¹¹⁶² The danger of separate realms is that it only furthers estrangement between God and humanity.

To live in Christ is to live in one reality. Life in the Christ-reality is not a life of separation or split realities. Christ does not further estrangement. Instead, to be in Christ is to also be in the world.¹¹⁶³ The Christ-reality points to wholeness both within and outside the self. Both are necessary for overcoming estrangement. The Christ-reality is a

¹¹⁵⁸ According to Bonhoeffer, “Things work out quite differently when the reality of God and the reality of the world are recognized in Christ. In that way, the world, the natural, the profane, and reason are seen as included in God from the beginning.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 59.

¹¹⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer writes, “It has its reality nowhere else than in the reality of God in Christ. It belongs to the real concept of the world that is at all times seen in the movement of the world’s both having been accepted and becoming by God in Christ.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 59.

¹¹⁶⁰ That is this work, Bonhoeffer explains, “Realizes itself again and again in human beings.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 59.

¹¹⁶¹ Meaning that, as Bonhoeffer puts it, “This unity is preserved by the fact that the worldly and the Christian, etc. mutually prohibit every static independence of the one over against the other, that they behave toward each other polemically.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 59.

¹¹⁶² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 61.

¹¹⁶³ Or as Bonhoeffer explains, “As reality is *one* in Christ, so the person who belongs to this Christ-reality is also a whole. Worldliness does not separate one from Christ, and being Christian does not separate one from the world. Belonging completely to Christ, one stands at the same time completely in the world.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 62.

life of acceptance of others and the acceptance of the self. Therefore there should be one realm, one space in the Christ-reality.

The one realm, or one space, of the Christ-reality calls for a church of the world. The church is not a space of escape. It is not a refuge from the outside world nor does it live in a vacuum. The church cannot escape, even it wanted, for there is nowhere to escape. A church that flees the world, flees its own self. More importantly, a church that flees ultimately flees from Christ. The church has no space to flee to nor does it have a space to call its own. It lives in the rented spaces of others.¹¹⁶⁴ Having no place to call its own, the church exists for the sake of others.¹¹⁶⁵ Though it has no place of its own, the church has not been abandoned. Christ has not left the church alone. In the Christ-reality, the church does have a space to live and work. Its space is the world itself.¹¹⁶⁶ Therefore, occupying the space of others, the church lives in its work for others. Its actions, its existence, is tied to the existence of others. The church needs to be *being-with* in order to be the church, and in *being-with* it does the work of Christ. Once it ceases to do that it ceases to be the church.

The church does not fight for its own space. It fights for the space of others. The church fights for the excluded, marginalized, and forgotten. It does no action for itself. Therefore the action of the church directly connects to others. In the church one should see the end of realms or separated realities. The reality of the church is the reality of the

¹¹⁶⁴ The church lives in what Michel de Certeau describes as “a universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 103.

¹¹⁶⁵ Bonhoeffer writes that “the space of the church does not, therefore, exist just for itself, but its existence is already something that reaches far beyond it.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 63.

¹¹⁶⁶ That is, as Bonhoeffer describes it, “The space of the church is not there in order to fight with the world for a piece of its territory, but precisely to testify to the world that is still the world, namely, the world that is loved and reconciled by God.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 63.

world, of Christ. Consequently the church's work is the world's work. The church works and acts for Christ, therefore, all the church does exists in the world. The church does not make space for Christ. Christ has already made space for the church through Christ's own redemptive action.¹¹⁶⁷ The church's work has already been done. The church is not the bridge between realms. It does not carry that burden. The church exists in the same state of estrangement shared by the world. In truth, the church shares in the general *otherness* of existence. The church is also an other.

The church is not against the world. In *otherness*, the church shares itself for the world. The church shares in the *otherness*, not to fight against it, but to embrace it. The church does not embrace the world, the other, through its own will. It embraces the other because all others are already embraced by Christ.¹¹⁶⁸ Both the church and the world have already been accepted by Christ. As such, there is no need for the church to reconcile the world. That is not the church's job. The work has already been done. Instead the church works in world in order to show that world has already been accepted by Christ. The church shares in the world so that the world may know that it is accepted. Both the church and the world have been accepted in Christ. The actions of the church make that reality, the Christ-reality, visible.¹¹⁶⁹ The church does not create this reality, it merely

¹¹⁶⁷ So for example, Bonhoeffer writes that when one "wants to speak of the space of the church, one must be aware that this space has already been broken through, abolished, and overcome in every moment by the witness of the church to Jesus Christ." Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 64.

¹¹⁶⁸ Bonhoeffer declares, "There is not part of the world, no matter how lost, not matter how godless, that has not been accepted by God in Jesus Christ and reconciled to God." Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 67.

¹¹⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer suggests that the church "expresses just this – that in the body of Christ all humanity is accepted, included, and borne, and that the church-community of believers is to make this known to the world by word and life." Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 67.

exposes it. It uncovers it from the veil of estrangement so that it can proclaim Christ to one unified reality.¹¹⁷⁰

Practice as Proclamation

Foot washing proclaims one unified reality in Christ.¹¹⁷¹ In foot washing, the church accepts and demonstrates its position as other. It accepts its *otherness* so that the other might feel accepted and included. Thus it opens a space for *all* others. Foot washing is an acceptance of one reality, the reality of the everyday. This reality is the reality of all others, therefore the church is neither excludes nor is excluded. Unlike baptism or communion, one does not need to declare one's faith before joining.¹¹⁷² In this manner foot washing is not set apart like baptism and communion. Whereas baptism and communion can be fairly described as sacred, at least in the traditional sense, foot washing is not. Foot washing is not a sacred moment if the sacred consists of a break from reality, the one Christ-reality. One cannot accept the everyday while remaining apart from it. Therefore OFWBs choose the everyday. Foot washing signifies their choice. In foot washing, OFWBs choose the other. They choose Christ.

¹¹⁷⁰ According to Bonhoeffer, "It is the task and the essence of the church-community to proclaim precisely to this world its reconciliation with God, and to disclose to it the reality of the love of God, against which the world so blindly rages." Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 66.

¹¹⁷¹ This is a reality in which the words of Christ become real. The example of Christ is brought to others. A pastor explains his perspective, "I would say basically it's just following the example of Christ. And by following that example we are to likewise. If you look at the attitude in the upper room that night. Peter's response was 'Lord you'll never wash my feet.' The Lord told him if 'I don't wash your feet you'll have no part of me.' Peter's response was 'not just my feet, all of me.' To me that's an aspect that, the humility in must come in. As Christians a lot of time we look at ourselves, and maybe we see ourselves different than others, I know a lot times we see ourselves different then the way maybe Christ sees us. A lot of time it is hard to humble you. I take foot washing in the same aspect as the altar. You look at a lot of people; a lot of people will not go to the altar on a Sunday morning service. You don't understand why because you've basically taken your burdens to Christ, sharing your burdens with Christ, and he already knows about your burden. He told us to cast our cares upon him and to trust him. Foot washing [is] within the same perspective, when we're willing to do that we're not just taking a part of what Christ said but we are taking all of what Christ said." Interview with OFWB pastor (K), February 12, 2015.

¹¹⁷² At least based on the OFWB *Articles of Faith*. Practices vary from church to church, but there is no written rule preventing an unbaptized individual from participating.

Foot washing is authentic in a way that baptism and communion are not. This is not to suggest that the actions of baptism and communion are in any way fake or false. Rather, separateness is fundamental to their being in a way that is not for foot washing. Certainly one can be baptized without a profession of faith, but action is not valid without the profession. An act of choice, “I choose Christ,” makes the action real.¹¹⁷³ Communion is contingent on the choice made in baptism. As such, only those who have made that choice can participate.¹¹⁷⁴ Foot washing requires no such choice or commitment, at least for OFWBs. If one is willing, one may participate in foot washing without making a profession of faith. Foot washing is not dependent on any prior choice. As long as one is an other, and all are, one is invited.

Even the place of practice signifies foot washing’s embrace of the everyday. Typically, OFWBs practice foot washing in a place other than the sanctuary.¹¹⁷⁵ Whether it is the fellowship hall, choir room, or a classroom, foot washing points to places other than the sanctuary.¹¹⁷⁶ Foot washing moves one away from the sacred to the mundane. It

¹¹⁷³ Of course one may argue that the choice of Christ is the choice for the one Christ-reality. This is of course true. In baptism one recognizes their life in this reality. However one cannot be baptized until one recognizes their acceptance by Christ. In foot washing there are no limits on who may participate. All are invited and included.

¹¹⁷⁴ This nature of this choice varies from community to community. However all communities require one to make this choice, or have the choice made for them, in order to participate. Even in the case of infant baptism, one is separated beforehand. It still involves a choice, either one’s own or another.

¹¹⁷⁵ Explaining how it is typically done, a pastor reflects how “it was a Mt. Zion, that church still divided the men and the women. At the time we were there they had a petition, say roughly 30 inches high that went down the center aisle of the church. And the ladies sat on one side and the men sat on the other. When they feet washing they did one at the time in what we would refer to now as a Sunday school room. One on each side, one lady at the time or two ladies rather. Two went in and two came out. They didn’t do it collectively like we do now. The same thing with the men. It was that way as well. Of course now, the ladies go to their appropriate place and the men go to theirs. Everybody’s either singing or doing feet washing all together taking turns basically speaking of taking care of each other.” Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

¹¹⁷⁶ Foot washing does and can occur in the sanctuary as well. In such case it usually occurs in the pews rather than the altar. Even in the sanctuary foot washing moves away from the places traditional considered as sacred.

gives special significance to the places one assumes as regular or typical. Of course this movement into other areas of the church is primarily for practical reasons such as space and modesty.¹¹⁷⁷ However even in its practicality, foot washing demonstrates something remarkable. Foot washing is not for sacred spaces. Instead it lives where people congregate and interact, like fellowship halls. Through and through, foot washing is mundane. Therefore foot washing fits the OFWB character. The OFWB are practical people. They very much, “what you see is what you get” type of people. Foot washing *works* because the people *work*. They *work* together in their *otherness*. Foot washing is thus their way of expressing their *otherness* and acceptance of one another.

Foot washing exposes the Christ-reality, thus uncovering it from the veil of estrangement. When practice, the action of foot washing is not proclaim itself. Neither are the OFWBs proclaiming themselves. When OFWBs practice foot washing, they proclaim the reality of the now. Foot washing is not about connecting with a metaphysical or spiritual realm. Foot washing is not escapism, favoring instead it a face to face encounter with the other. Foot washing is nothing less than up close and personal.¹¹⁷⁸ One cannot escape reality because this reality is staring one in the face. There is no higher plane to escape to. This is the reality of touch, intimacy, and uncomfortableness. Foot washing is the *stuff* of the everyday. It is the *stuff* that is neither

¹¹⁷⁷ This is not a perfect example of one reality in Christ. There is no perfect way of demonstrating the Christ-reality. OFWBs usually divide men and women in foot washing. This is done for modesty rather than signifying some ontological divide between men and women. The practice is meant to be equal for both men and women. Ideally men and women would wash one another’s feet in order to demonstrate the oneness of their fellowship.

¹¹⁷⁸ A pastor describes foot washing’s personal nature, He says, “I feel like it’s tied to the fact that we are incarnate, we’re in the flesh. I think it’s a very incarnational type of act for our church. I view it as a sacramental thing. It reminds us that we are incarnate. It leads to the incarnation of Christ. He came in the flesh to minister to people who are in the flesh.” Interview with OFWB pastor, February 6, 2015. One may notice the use the word “sacramental.” He is not stating that foot washing is a sacrament. He is describing its spiritual and incarnational nature.

quantifiable nor predictable. Quite frankly, foot washing does not make sense. Yet this is why foot washing works so well. It proclaims the unpredictable nature of life. It proclaims humanity, the *otherness* of reality. It is proclaims a reality that Christ has accepted and made his own.

True Love

The Christ-reality is the reality of love. It is one reality, one acceptance, and one love in Christ. Therefore the Christ-reality can also be called the reality of love. To love is to live in this reality. Love does not escape or separate itself from this realm. Love does not seek a higher plane of existence. It does idealize a reality hidden from human eyes. Love is the reality of Christ and, as Bonhoeffer writes, “Our living as real human beings, and loving the real people next to us is, again, grounded only in God’s becoming human, in the unfathomable love of God for us human beings.”¹¹⁷⁹ Love is grounded in Christ’s love for the other as the ultimate other. Participation in the reality of the other is a participation in reality of Christ. It is allowing oneself to be formed and molded into the Christ reality, which is the reality of love. Christ, who is love, forms human beings.¹¹⁸⁰ Only love can form one into love.¹¹⁸¹ Love molds one into itself. One does not add love to their own being. Love is never an addition to being. To be formed by love is become love. Love is total or it is not at all. Love forms one into its own form.¹¹⁸²

¹¹⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 87.

¹¹⁸⁰ “Formation occurs only by being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ, by *being conformed to the unique form of the one who became human, was crucified, and is risen* [italics in the original].” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 93.

¹¹⁸¹ That is, as Bonhoeffer explains, “Christ remains the only one who forms. Christian people do not form the world with their ideas.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 93.

¹¹⁸² “Christ forms human beings to a form the same as Christ’s own.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 93.

The church, Bonhoeffer asserts, “Is not a religious community of those who revere Christ, but Christ who has taken form among human beings.”¹¹⁸³ The church takes on this form, the form of love, in order share this love with all the world. The church is no greater than anyone else. It is neither special nor unique.¹¹⁸⁴ It lives in estrangement and *otherness*. It is not therefore not the church that acts, but Christ who acts through the church. The church does not proclaim a religion,¹¹⁸⁵ instead, the church proclaims the Christ-reality to all.

The church acts for human beings. The church does not act for a theory or a philosophy. The church acts for people, for all reality, or it does not act at all.¹¹⁸⁶ As an action of the church, foot washing acts for people, so that all may know the Christ-reality. Ultimately, this is why OFWBs do foot washing. OFWBs practice foot washing for people.¹¹⁸⁷ They are the embodiment of Christ for others.¹¹⁸⁸ It is a real love for real people.

¹¹⁸³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 96.

¹¹⁸⁴ Or as Bonhoeffer explains, “The church is nothing but that piece of humanity where Christ really has taken form...The church is the human being who has become human, has been judged, and has been awakened to new life in Christ.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 97.

¹¹⁸⁵ Bonhoeffer writes that the “church’s concern is not a religion, but the form of Christ and its taking form among a band of people.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 97.

¹¹⁸⁶ Bonhoeffer makes it very clear that Christ acts for people rather than ideas. Christ became human. Christ not become an idea. He claims that “Christ was not concerned about whether ‘the maxim of an action’ could become ‘a principle of universal law,’ but whether my action now helps my neighbor to be a human being before God. God did not become an idea, a principle, a program, a universally valid belief, or a law; God became human.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 99.

¹¹⁸⁷ Foot washing can become part of the OFWB identity. A pastor says, “It’s a vibrant part of us as a denomination. To me it is a major part of who I am as an OFWB.” Interview with OFWB pastor (D), March 30, 2015.

¹¹⁸⁸ Bonhoeffer writes, “*The church is the place where Jesus Christ’s taking form is proclaimed and where it happens* [italics in the original].” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 102.

Chapter Seven: Toward a Relational Practical Theology

*A beautiful face is perhaps the only place where true silence is to be found.*¹¹⁸⁹

The Silent Language

Interpretation runs the risk of saying too much. Sometimes one needs to step back and appreciate the silence. Silence is an appreciation of what cannot be said, heard, and predicted in interpretation.¹¹⁹⁰ Following the early Wittgenstein, he suggests that “what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.”¹¹⁹¹ Certain limits should be respected in interpretation. Thus, interpretation includes the known and the limits of what can be known.¹¹⁹² The goal is balancing between language (the said or known) and silence (what cannot be said or know). Interpretation does not work to organize and categorize. Silence is not a mystery needing to be solved or explained. Instead, interpretation is a matter of respecting silence and the mystery.¹¹⁹³ Silence represents what cannot be put into words.¹¹⁹⁴

¹¹⁸⁹ As Agamben puts it, “Character marks the human face with all the words not said, all the intentions never acted upon; the face of an animal always seems on the verge of speaking; but human beauty opens the face to silence. The silence that prevails is not the simple suspension of discourse, but the silence of the word itself; the idea of language. For this reason, in the face, and there alone, is [humanity] truly at home. Giorgio Agamben, “Image and Silence,” trans. Leland de la Durantaye, in *diacritics* 40, no.2 (2012): 94-98, 2012.

¹¹⁹⁰ It is not only important but necessary. Silence keeps thought open. Franke writes, “The idea or ideal of the whole greater than what we can apprehend, of the whole that is yet to come, is actually necessary to keep us from closing the circle of our own little utopia around those who think like us, thereby ignoring the demand of universality.” William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 46.

¹¹⁹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 1974), 3.

¹¹⁹² Wittgenstein writes that “in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).” Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 3.

¹¹⁹³ Sometimes what is most fundamental and true is what cannot be said. Frank for example argues, “Truth is not what we grasp and deliver in the end as our final discourse, but what escapes all our formulations and remains in the silence after all is said and done.” Franke, *Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 53.

¹¹⁹⁴ According to Wittgenstein, “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.” Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 89.

Silence is pregnant with meaning,¹¹⁹⁵ thus meaning is birthed from silence.¹¹⁹⁶ Meaning, linguistic or otherwise, is not *ex nihilo*. Language may begin in the mind, but as Martin Buber explains, “in actuality speech does not abide in [a person], but [a person] takes his stand in speech and talks from there.”¹¹⁹⁷ Language is not its own creator, but begins in the unformed state of silence. Silence is a place of openness, holding the unformed words yet to come. Augustine recognizes this when writing, “Therefore, my God, my confession before you is made both in silence and not in silence. It is silent in that it is not audible sound; but in love it cries aloud.”¹¹⁹⁸ Silence is not devoid of meaning, instead silence speaks.

Silence challenges language.¹¹⁹⁹ Silence reminds language that it is not alone. It needs to be challenge for language *talks too much*.¹²⁰⁰ Language comes easy, and expression is not ending anytime soon.¹²⁰¹ The Teacher recognized this long ago writing,

¹¹⁹⁵ William Franke writes, “What we most strongly and deeply think and believe, what we passionately love or ardently desire, inevitably escapes adequate articulation. It is always more, if not completely other, than what we are able to say. This common human experience of butting up against the limits of language is experienced paradigmatically in the disciplines of philosophy, theology, and poetry.” Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 23.

¹¹⁹⁶ See for example when Franke argues, “Nothing is pregnant with Everything – albeit a new, wild everything set free from the nets and webs of language and so no longer corralled by Logos.” Franke, *Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 68.

¹¹⁹⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 39.

¹¹⁹⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 179.

¹¹⁹⁹ Language is challenge by the unsayable. Sometimes a helpful skepticism about language can help to make what can be said more understandable. Franke explains, “The apophatic sage is skeptical about all this is known – all that is accessible to language – in order to be fascinated by the mystery that language does not deliver and cannot master. In this way, when apophatic writers deprecate language, they have already presupposed its potency to gesture toward what it is insufficient to articulate but nevertheless indicates as lying beyond itself.” Franke, *Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 64.

¹²⁰⁰ Marion writes, “The surprising thing, therefore, is not our difficulty in speaking of God but indeed our difficulty in keeping silent. For in fact, with regard to God, overwhelmingly, we speak. In a sense we speak only about that, and much too much, with neither modesty nor precaution.” Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 55.

¹²⁰¹ Perhaps this indicates that there is still something that cannot be said. Human beings are still searching for the right words to express in inexpressible. Franke argues that this process will continue indefinitely. He writes that “what motivates never-ending human saying of things could only be something that never can be said. The very fact that we go on speaking indicates that something – something that

“Of making many books there is no end.”¹²⁰² While silence is uncomfortable, language is oppressive. Language oppresses silence by speaking in order to keep silence silent.¹²⁰³ In a manner of speaking, silence is not allowed to *speak*.¹²⁰⁴

Silence should be respected.¹²⁰⁵ In interpretation, silence can become an obstacle to meaning. One fights against silence hoping that its removal will pave the way towards clarity. However, to fight against silence is to fight against interpretation itself. Silence exists within the foundation of language,¹²⁰⁶ setting itself at the center of language. Silence marks the boundary and limit of language.¹²⁰⁷ Instead of fighting silence, interpretation shifts towards acknowledging it.

Silence is the flux, the unknown element. It is the unexpected within the expected. Once acknowledge, silence points towards the future. Marion writes, “This silence, and no other, knows where it is, whom it silences, and why it must, for yet a time, preserve a

concerns us enough to make us keep on speaking – still remains unsaid. And since there is no built-in limit to the continuation of our speaking, this something unsaid proves, in effect, to be unsayable, at least for as long as we go on speaking.” Franke, *Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 24.

¹²⁰² *The Harper Collins Study Bible New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), Ecc. 12:12.

¹²⁰³ Language can push silence away. One is no longer able to *hear* the silence. Buber argues, “But truly through God surrounds us and dwells in us, we never have [God] in us. And we speak with [God] only when speech dies within us.” *I and Thou*, 104.

¹²⁰⁴ There is discourse, according to Marion, that “disqualifies or deconstructs the very notion of God; this discourse consists in speaking of God in order to silence [God], in not keeping silent in order to silence him.” *God Without Being*, 55.

¹²⁰⁵ Marion explains, “More modestly, the silence suitable to G×d requires knowing how to remain silent, not out of agnosticism (the polite surname of impossible atheism) or out of humiliation, but simply out of respect.” *God Without Being*, 107.

¹²⁰⁶ Franke states, “We seek reassurance from language, from the stories it tells us, but words always essentially cancel themselves out because their meaning ultimately posits some absolute, unambiguous presence which can never be concretely given in the medium of language. It is the nature of the words as signs to indicate something absent from themselves, something they are not.” Franke, *Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 76.

¹²⁰⁷ Elliot Wolfson states, “Silence, therefore, is not to be set in binary opposition to language, but is rather the margin that demarcates its center.” Eliot Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 289.

mute decency – to free itself from idolatry.”¹²⁰⁸ The silence has to remain free in order to preserve the unexpected. It waits for its moment to emerge.¹²⁰⁹ The hidden silence waits in all language, including the body. The body speaks, yet silences hides within the body. The body hides what is to come. It hides the coming in-between, the unknown, and the unexpected.

It is necessary to find ways of appreciating and respecting silence.¹²¹⁰ This is especially important for interpreting ritual action. The natural tendency is to interpret and explain. As such, a respectful interpretation is one that respects and appreciates silence. It respects and appreciates what one cannot know.¹²¹¹ Interpretation that respects silences accepts it as boundary one cannot cross. This boundary is not a failure of knowledge or the absence of meaning. The boundary allow room for the unexpected to emerge.

Shifting to Relationality

A shift toward relationality is needed in order to engage ritual action. How this relationality will look remains a vexing problem. How does one approach ritual action without analyzing it like an object or a thing? Objectification of ritual action is

¹²⁰⁸ Marion, *God Without Being*, 107.

¹²⁰⁹ Silence, the unsayable, reaches one at precisely the right moment. See when Franke writes, “The *what* that is said is but a vehicle for an undefined and indefinable, unspeakable but superlatively, pathetically significant...we cannot say what. We are confronted with this unspeakable again and again in the drama of human existence, and we are driven to all manners of shifts and evasions with words in our more or less transparent attempts to master it. It reaches us precisely at the moment when we perceive what cannot be said as the real and vital meaning or meaninglessness of all that actually is said.” Franke, *Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 78.

¹²¹⁰ It requires a sensitivity to silence. Language does not have the final say. What cannot be said is as important as what can be said. See where Franke writes, “Sensitivity to the apophatic means learning to interpret our own language somewhat more cannily in its inescapable relation to what it cannot say. This relation, though invisible and purely negative, determines our bearing toward all that we can and do say...Perhaps we can learn to read them better by reading them together.” Franke, *Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 79.

¹²¹¹ Franke explains that “discourses do not always – or perhaps ever – say what their deepest meaning and motivations are. To fathom this ‘truth’ we have to break with interpreting just the words, and yet, paradoxically, only the words [or actions] are there to guide us...beyond themselves.” Franke, *Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 79.

challenging for the theologian, philosopher, and social theorist.¹²¹² Over confidence is still a problem in ritual action. This is true for scholars and academics who may still declare with total assurance, “See! This is what it means!” Scholars and academics would be better suited to follow the example of Paul who admits that he does not even understand his own actions.¹²¹³

Scholars and academics, theologically, philosophically, and socially, look from the outside in. While doing so, they determine the meaning of these actions. Meaning is comes from the outside in, ignoring the meaning already present. It may not be the predicted meaning, but meaning was never absent. Ritual actions was already meaningful. The scholar only needs to converse with the meaning already present.¹²¹⁴

Going forward, a relational theology is required, or what one may call a *relational practical theology*. Using Martin Buber as a guide, one can glimpse at what a relational practical theology might look like. His seminal work, *I and Thou* can serve as a basis for future theological, philosophical, and social engagement with ritual action.

I, Thou, and It

¹²¹² The temptation of objectification can never be removed. Human beings have a natural inclination towards knowing the *how* of how things work. For the most part, this inclination serves humanity well. This works well in determining the nature of the universe or how a machine functions, but is remarkably bad at determining human behavior. Human beings are notoriously illogical and unpredictable. More often than not, human beings do not know why they do the things they do. Humans are paradoxical in that pursue paths and courses of action that they know will fail. They continue practices they fully know are destructive to their own health and the health of those around us. Ascribing any meaning, globally or individual, to human practices appears as a futile endeavor. However, despite this, human beings continue to proclaim confidently the meaning of things.

¹²¹³ Consider Paul’s classic formulation, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” *The Harper Collins Study Bible New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), Rom. 7:15.

¹²¹⁴ This meaning, or meanings, may be unpredictable and unclear. Nevertheless, it is still meaning.

Ritual action can be approached as a *thou* rather than an *It*. The mentality between a *Thou* and *It* is remarkably different. As Martin Buber puts it, “Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds.”¹²¹⁵ An *It* is under the control of others, existing for the will of others. The *It* is a thing to be used, manipulated, and regulated by others. An *It* is the perfect scientific specimen, perfectly suited for testing. All interaction with the *It* is one-sided, therefore true relationship is not possible. The *It* exists for the *I*’s pleasure. Many of life’s experiences are based on an *I-It* relationship.¹²¹⁶

The *Thou* is characteristically different from the *It*. Buber uses an example of a tree to explain this difference. The classification and careful study of a tree belong to an *I-It* relationship. One partner is subjected to the scrutiny of the other. The *I* dominates the *It*, subduing, Buber writes, “its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognise it only as an expression of law.”¹²¹⁷ In contrast, an *I-Thou* relationship is a true relationship. In such a relationship, *I* does not control or objectify the *Thou*. Instead, it is a relationship of being bound. The *I* is bound in relationship to the *Thou*.¹²¹⁸ The tree’s unique existence becomes a matter of deep importance to the *I*. Thus an *I-Thou* relationship is one of being intertwined.

It is important to distinguish between experience and relationship, especially in person-to-person encounters. An experience is not necessarily a relationship. One can

¹²¹⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 4.

¹²¹⁶ Buber writes, “As experience, the world belongs to the primary word *I-It*.” Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 6.

¹²¹⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 7.

¹²¹⁸ The tree, according to Buber, can become a *Thou* “if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound in relationship to it. The tree is now no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 7.

experience another person's existence without entering into a relationship. An experience can be completely one-sided and impersonal. The scientist experiences an object under his or her control when testing a hypothesis. An experience can remain afar even if that experience is personal. A relationship, on the other hand, is standing before the other. The entire existence of the *I* stands before the *Thou*. Furthermore, it is not only that the *I* stands before the *Thou*. The *I* stands before the *Thou* in relationship.¹²¹⁹ A relationship with the *Thou* is, as Buber suggests, "the cradle of the Real Life."¹²²⁰

Relationship with the *Thou* comes as an act of grace.¹²²¹ It is meeting in the truest sense of the word. The *Thou* meets the *I* and in return the *I* enters into direct relationship with the *Thou*.¹²²² The *Thou* does not coerce the *I*, rather the *I* chooses the *Thou*. The *I* accepts the *Thou's* invitation of a direct relationship.¹²²³ This direct relationship is one of becoming. The *I* meets the *Thou*, and in turn is shaped and molded by the *Thou*. Thus the *I* becomes an *I* only in relation to the *Thou*.¹²²⁴ One does not enter the *Thou* and remain the same. Distance prevents becoming in the *I-It* experience, but the *I-Thou* relationship fosters change.

¹²¹⁹ Or as Buber describes it, "I do not experience the man [or woman] to whom I say *Thou*. But I take my stand in relation to him, in the sanctity of the primary word. Only when I step out of it do I experience him [or her] once more. In the act of experience *Thou* is far away." Buber, *I and Thou*, 9.

¹²²⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 9.

¹²²¹ Buber states, "The *Thou* meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking." Buber, *I and Thou*, 11.

¹²²² Buber writes, "The *Thou* meets me. But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one." Buber, *I and Thou*, 11.

¹²²³ Buber writes, "The relation to the *Thou* is direct." Buber, *I and Thou*, 11.

¹²²⁴ As Buber states, "I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting." Buber, *I and Thou*, 11.

The *I-Thou* relationship, is in the eternal now.¹²²⁵ It is a continual process. The *I-Thou* is never complete, rather it is always in the indeterminate flux of the now.¹²²⁶ Because the relationship is never fixed, either in time or space, there remains the possibility of change. Both the *Thou* and the *I* exist in an indeterminate state. In each moment of the now, there is the potential for the *Thou* to shape the *I* and vice versa. It is a mutual relationship of shared flux and instability.¹²²⁷ A relationship with the *Thou* has to be indeterminate and unstable, otherwise it risks being turned into a *It*. Buber suggests that when “the relation has been worked out or has been permeated with a means, the *Thou* becomes an object among objects – perhaps the chief, but still one of them.”¹²²⁸ As soon as the *I-Thou* relationship is defined it ceases to be *I-Thou* and becomes *I-It*. Once the mystery is removed, all that is left is the cold analysis of objectification. This is the continual temptation of the *I*. The *I*, unsatisfied with the undefined *Thou*, attempts to define the *Thou*. Perhaps it is done in an act of respect. The *I*, in seeking to better understand the *Thou*, goes too far. The *I*, in its hubris, fails to recognize its own

¹²²⁵ As opposed to the *I-It* experience, where the *I* meets its objects in the past. According to Buber, “True beings are lived in the present, the life of objects is in the past.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 13. Tillich puts it as, “We accept the present and do not care that it is gone in the moment that we accept it. We live in in and it is renewed for us in every new ‘present.’ This is possible because every moment of time reaches into the eternal. It is the eternal that stops the flux of time for us. It is the eternal ‘now’ which provides for us a temporal ‘now.’” Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 131.

¹²²⁶ Living in the present prevents the *I-Thou* from becoming fixed. Buber explains that the “present is not fugitive and transient, but continually present and enduring. The object is not duration, but cessation, suspension, a breaking off and cutting clear and hardening, absence of relation and of present being.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 13.

¹²²⁷ Buber writes, “Relation is mutual. My *Thou* affects me, as I affect it. We are moulded by our pupils and built up by our works...We live our lives inscrutably included within the streaming mutual life of the universe.” Buber, 15-16.

¹²²⁸ Buber, *I and Thou*, 17.

limitations. It fails to respect the boundaries between what is known and unknown. The *I* believes it knows more than it actually does and thus creates a thing of the *Thou*.¹²²⁹

The *I-Thou* relationship is unpredictable. This is due to the constant changing nature of the relationship. Because the relationship lives in the present, it is always subject to change. The past does not determine it, nor is the future set. As such, between the *I* and *Thou*, there is a mutual giving leading to mutual change.¹²³⁰ This changes one's total being. Once one enters an *I-Thou* relationship, all future relationships are forever changed. All other relationships are subsequently compared to *Thou*, creating a continual longing for it. An experience of the *Thou* is an experience of infinite possibility. In meeting the *Thou*, one meets the infinite new.¹²³¹ Its now-ness precludes the *I-Thou* relationship from being set in space and time.¹²³² It occurs in the ever present moment of the now.¹²³³

The *I-Thou* is fundamentally important for understanding ritual action. There is a striking contrast between objectification (*I-It*) and relationship (*I-Thou*). The temptation for scholars is to approach ritual action from the position of the *I-It*. This is the position of distance. One may experience the ritual action, in terms of participating and being

¹²²⁹ According to Buber, "Every *Thou* in the world is by its nature fated to become a thing, or continually to re-enter into the condition of things." Buber, *I and Thou*, 17.

¹²³⁰ Buber states, "Between you and it there is mutual giving: you say *Thou* to it and give yourself to it, it says *Thou* to you and gives itself to you." Buber, *I and Thou*, 33.

¹²³¹ See for example when Buber writes, "You cannot make yourself understood with other concerning it, you are alone with it. But it teaches you to meet others, and to hold your ground when you meet them. Through the graciousness of its comings and the solemn sadness of its going it leads you away to the *Thou* in which the parallel lines of relations meet. It does not help to sustain you in life, it only helps you to glimpse eternity." Buber, *I and Thou*, 33.

¹²³² That is, as Buber explains, "The world of *It* is set in the context of space and time. The world of *Thou* is not set in the context of either of these." Buber, *I and Thou*, 33.

¹²³³ Tillich says, "The mystery is that we *have* a present; and even more, that we have *our* future also because we anticipate it in the present; and that we have *our* past also, because we remember it in the present. In the present our future and our past are *ours* [italics in the original]." Tillich, *The Eternal Now*, 130.

present, but scholarly distance keeps one in the role of an outsider. As long as one remains at a distance, objectification cannot be overcome. Ritual action remains a thing in the eyes of the scholar. This is not to disparage scholarly distance. Distance reminds scholars that experience does not equal relationship. However, between the *I-It* and *I-Thou* there is fundamental difference in interpretation. In the *I-It*, meaning is thrust upon ritual action from the outside. In the *I-Thou* meaning is relational. One enters into a relationship with the other and is bound to that other. An *I-Thou* relationship is one that changes the scholar and the participant. Both are in a mutual relationship with one another.

The *I-Thou* relationship is twofold. In addition to the relationship between the scholar and action there is the relationship between participants. The *I-Thou* requires both a recognition of the *I* (the individual) and the *Thou* (individuals in relationship). An *I-Thou* relationship would help one to recognize how the *Thou* works in the lives of others. To be clear, this relationship cannot last forever. Inevitably *I-Thou* returns to *I-It*. Once the relationship of the present turns into an experience of the past, the ritual action becomes yet again a thing. This is a natural progression of experience into knowledge.¹²³⁴ The goal is recognizing this continual back and forth between *I-Thou* and *I-It*. One does not seek to stay in the experience of the *I-It*. The hope is that one would return to the relationship of the *I-Thou*.

The Mutual Relation of *I-Thou*

¹²³⁴ According to Buber, "Only as *It* can it enter the structure of knowledge." Buber, *I and Thou*, 40.

The *I-It* and the *I-Thou* are distinguished by spirit. According to Buber, “Spirit in its human manifestation is a response of [humanity] to his [or her] *Thou*.”¹²³⁵ In-between the *I* and *Thou* is spirit. Spirit is not something that comes from outside this relationship. Instead, spirit denotes the relationship between the two. Spirit is what enables the *I* to enter into relationship with the *Thou*. Spirit, Buber writes, “is not like the blood that circulates in you, but like the air in which you breathe.”¹²³⁶ By living in this spirit, breathing it in, the *I* enters into the *Thou*. The *I-Thou* is thus a spiritual encounter whereas *I-It* is based on knowledge. The experience is not necessarily spiritual, but a relationship implies a connection that one may call spiritual.¹²³⁷ Spirit suggests a continual openness, an ability to live in the now, while *I-It* fixes things in place in order to better describe it. *I-It* slows and stops the flux, while the spiritual nature of *I-Thou* lives in the unpredictable and instable now.¹²³⁸ In between the self and the other, the spirit teaches the *I* how to live in the presence of the *Thou*. Life in the spirit, in the presence of the *Thou*, is a relationship with the living.¹²³⁹ At last, what separates *I-It* from *I-Thou* is life lived among the living. The *I-It* experience is that of the past. It codifies life and thus ends it. The *I-Thou*, on the other hand, lives into life.

The realm of the *I-It* is institutions. In contrast, the realm of *I-Thou* is life itself. The institution is where the *It*, the object, is poked and prodded. It is a place of

¹²³⁵ Buber, *I and Thou*, 39.

¹²³⁶ Buber, *I and Thou*, 39.

¹²³⁷ Or as Buber states, “Only in virtue of his [or her] power to enter into relation is he [or she] able to live in the spirit.” *I and Thou*, 39.

¹²³⁸ Buber writes, “*It*, hardened into a thing among things, has had the nature and disposition put into it to change back again and again. This was the meaning in that hour of the spirit

¹²³⁹ Buber states, “This life is present, then, to those who come later, to teach them not what is and must be, but how life is lived in the spirit, face to face with the *Thou*.” *I and Thou*, 42.

knowledge.¹²⁴⁰ The institution takes what was alive and freezes it for its careful study. The institution provides a snapshot of the object. One can learn a lot from a snapshot, everything *about* the object, but not the *living* subject in question.

The goal of the institution is not relationship. Buber states that the “separated *It* of institutions is an animated clod without soul, and the separated *I* of feelings an uneasily fluttering soul-bird. Neither of them knows [humanity].”¹²⁴¹ The mutual relation of the *I-Thou* is outside the boundary of both. The *I-Thou* relationship requires more than increased study or personal fervor. The *I-Thou* relationship is a living mutual relationship.¹²⁴²

This living mutual relationship is thus the goal of both the *I-Thou* relationship and one’s own being. The goal of relation, Buber writes, “is relation’s own being, that is, contact with the *Thou*.”¹²⁴³ A relationship with the *Thou* is a sharing of being. Thus, an *I-Thou* relationship is truly an encounter with the other. The *I* encounters the other, not as a thing, but as unified whole. Unlike the *I-It*, where both parties remain unchanged, *I-Thou* signals a relationship built on change. This change is due to the sharing of being with the other. The other no longer remains on the outside of the *I*’s existence, nor is the other absorbed into the *I*. Instead the other becomes *Thou*.¹²⁴⁴ In a mutual relationship, a

¹²⁴⁰ Buber defines institutions as the place “where all sorts of aims are pursued, where a man [or woman] works, negotiates, bears influence, undertakes, concurs, organizes, conducts business, officiates, preaches. They are tolerably well-ordered and to some extent harmonious structure, in which, with the manifold help of men’s [and women’s] brains and hand, the process of affairs is fulfilled.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 43.

¹²⁴¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 44.

¹²⁴² Buber explains this as follows, “Living mutual relation includes feelings, but does not originate with them. The community is built up out of living mutual relation, but the builder is the living effective Centre.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 45.

¹²⁴³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 63.

¹²⁴⁴ Buber argues, “He [or she] who takes his [or her] stand in relation shares in a reality, that is, in a being that neither merely belongs to him [or her] nor merely lies outside him [or her].” Buber, *I and Thou*, 63.

sharing existence, the other becomes a *Thou*. Buber writes that the “more direct the contact with the *Thou*, the fuller is the sharing.”¹²⁴⁵ The sharing serves to further the relationship and connection with the *Thou*. In the *Thou*, the *I* realizes its true being and purpose. In the *Thou*, the *I* discovers itself as sharing being.¹²⁴⁶ One begins to define oneself in relation to others. The *Thou* enlightens one’s own being, thus saving the *I* from its individuality.¹²⁴⁷

The *I-Thou* represents the ideal of theological relationship. The goal of theological reflection is neither for the institution nor the individual. Instead, in theological reflection one should enter into a relationship with the *Thou*. This is a theology founded on the *I-Thou* rather than the *I-It*. The theology of the *I-It* is a theology that exists for itself. It sees the outside world as a thing to be studied or discovered. Theology masters the object and by implication imposes its own will and purpose on an unwilling other. This is the theology of the institution and the scholar. It is a theology that proclaims and passes judgment on all it sees. The *I-It* is the theology of the strong. It is the inability to enter into relationship with the other. Fearing change, it is unwilling to submit itself into the hands of the other. The *I-It* is a theology of distance. It remains at a safe distance in order to preserve its supposed purity. This is not to say it believes itself to be superior, instead it fears the possibility of change. The *I-It* theology is careful to keep itself on the side of power. It seeks change, but not change for itself. *I-It* theology seeks to change the *It* without changing itself.

¹²⁴⁵ Buber, *I and Thou*, 63.

¹²⁴⁶ According to Buber, “The person becomes conscious of himself [or herself] as sharing in being, as co-existing, and thus as being.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 63.

¹²⁴⁷ See for example when Buber states, “The more a man [or woman], humanity, is mastered by individuality, the deeper does the *I* sink into unreality. In such times the person in man and in humanity leads a hidden subterranean and as it were cancelled existence – till it is recalled.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 65.

I-It theology is experience but not a relationship. It experiences without entering into the life of the other. Experience does not equal relationship. One can experience the other without entering into relationship. Experience can be a blurry boundary. It is unclear when experience transitions into relationship. There is no easy way of defining the passage from experience to relationship. Relationships do not form overnight after all, though some experiences can create the feeling of relationship. Their sudden and overwhelming intensity can create a belief of relationship. Of course experiences can lead into a relationship, but there is no guarantee that they will. Relationships can be built off the repeated exposure of experience. One experiences his or her thoughts, feelings, opinions, story, and so on before the passing into relationship.

One works at relationship in order for it to develop. The *I-Thou* requires both parties in mutual sharing. The *I-Thou* share in one another's existence, whereas the *I-It* remain independent from one another. Experience never translates into mutual sharing and thus neither become a *Thou* for the other.

Mutual sharing parallels the theological relationship. It suggests a theology that not only seeks to experience the other, but also enter into the other's life. Such a theology would recognize that it is not enough to explore and experience the world.¹²⁴⁸ In the matter of ritual action, a relational theology would view ritual action as an opportunity for change and relationship.¹²⁴⁹ Ritual action is no longer viewed as a stranger, but as a theological partner. Ritual action, and its participants, share in one another's existence.

¹²⁴⁸ A theology that explains or seeks to justify its existence (or God's for that matter) remains paralyzed in the *I-It*. It is a theology of the *I* in a world of *Its*. A theology of the *I-Thou*, on the other hand, lets go of itself. It lets go of its desire to be for itself so that it might be for the other.

¹²⁴⁹ The implication being that theology would seek not only to study the other, but enter into the life of the other.

Theology shares in the life of the community, in turn the community shares its life theological. Mutual sharing means that there is blurring between who is doing theology. Theology becomes something shared between the theologian and the community. Ritual action *speaks* its theology, and shares itself with the theologian. It opens itself to the theologian, and in turn, the theologian is opened to the ritual action.

This relationship is constantly changing. There are times when the *I-Thou* reverts back to an *I-It*. The theologian and the community inevitably separate. It is impossible to achieve a perfect union, one where mutual sharing can continue indefinitely. There is inevitably a break between the theologian and community. This is precisely why relationship is so difficult. One has to continually strive for it. Relationship, the *Thou*, is sought for continually.

Thou, God, and Theology

A theology of sharing places one into an encounter with God. The *I-Thou* has application not only to a relationships between persons, but also a relationship with God.¹²⁵⁰ The *Thou* is a personal and complete confrontation with the other. This is not a partial encounter, meaning one's total being comes face to face with the *Thou*. The *I-Thou* relationship is a direct relation between whole beings. Moving toward each other, the *Thou* offers the invitation, which the *I* either accepts or rejects. The *I* cannot partially accept the *Thou*. It must be complete or not at all. The *I* steps toward the *Thou*, leaving nothing of itself behind. The *Thou* will accept nothing less.¹²⁵¹

¹²⁵⁰ Buber states, "For he [or she] who speaks the word God and really has *Thou* in mind (whatever the illusion by which he [or she] is held), addresses the true *Thou* of his [or her] life, which cannot be limited by another *Thou*, and to which he [or she] stand in a relation that gathers up and includes all others." Buber, *I and Thou*, 76.

¹²⁵¹ Buber explains that the "*Thou* confronts me. But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering, and action in one; just as any action of the whole

Confrontation with the *Thou* takes place in the world rather than some outside reality. When confronting the *Thou*, one encounters another in shared space. The space of the *Thou* is the same space of the *I*. The *I-Thou* is not an otherworldly relationship, instead it occurs in the unfolding present without a barrier of separation.¹²⁵² Because of the *I-Thou's*, *presentness*, it suggests a real and imminent relationship. Only in the present face-to-face encounter can the *I-Thou* take place. One has to be in a position to meet their *Thou*. This can only take place in present reality. Buber states that “the one thing that matters is visible, full acceptance of the present.”¹²⁵³ One needs to accept the present as a place of encounter in order to meet the *Thou*. As long as one’s gaze is elsewhere, one cannot help but miss the *Thou*. The search for a world outside of the present, spiritual or metaphysical, ignores the present *Thou*. It ignores the *Thou's* present work in individual persons and communities.

The temptation is to hold onto these other realms. The metaphysical and the spiritual become areas of control. They exist as realms of the *It*, places where theologians and philosophers can confidently dabble. These realms function as a sandbox of experimentation, an eternal playground of control where scholars are only limited by their imaginations. In such places the *Thou* cannot exist. The world outside the present is a world of control and manipulation. It is no wonder that theologians and philosophers would prefer this over the present.¹²⁵⁴ The present represents the uncontrollable and

being which means the suspension of all partial actions, and consequently of all sensations of actions grounded only in their particular limitation, is bound to resemble suffering.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 76-77.

¹²⁵² According to Buber, “There is no illusory world, there is only the world...Only the barrier of separation has to be destroyed. Further, no ‘going beyond sense-experience’ is necessary; for every experience, even the most spiritual, could yield us only an *It*.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 77.

¹²⁵³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 78.

¹²⁵⁴ For Buber, “The *I* is as indispensable to this, the supreme, as to every relation, since relation is only possible between *I and Thou*. It is not the *I*, then, that is given up, but that false self-asserting instinct

unpredictable. The metaphysical and spiritual realms are ordered by the scholars themselves. The present moment is beyond the control of scholars. It is subject to no one.

The irony is that theologians and philosophers flee the present in order to find God, and Being. They seek truth, goodness, and beauty elsewhere. Buber writes that “if you deny the life of things and of conditioned being you stand before nothingness, if you hallow this life you meet the living God.”¹²⁵⁵ It is not enough to just stand before the world. Turning one’s gaze toward the world, the present, does not guarantee a meeting with *Thou*. This is Buber’s paradox.¹²⁵⁶ God is never *sought* either in this world or beyond it. God is encountered. The idea that one *seeks* God borders the realm of the *It*. Seeking can entail control, the desire to bring this other into one’s domain of control.

The *I* eternally seeks for another *It* to control. The *I* seeks to know, and therefore control what it does not understand. The *I* does this in its naiveté, without thinking. Of course, knowledge comes from seeking that which one does not know or understand. However, seeking does not help one reach God.¹²⁵⁷ The *thingification* of God, either outside or inside the world, belongs to the *I-It*.

One ought to therefore give up, or let go, of the instinct to seek God. God is not a treasure hunt. A treasure map gives one a sense of control. As long as one follows the

that makes a man flee to the possessing of things before the unreliable, perilous world of relation which has neither destiny nor duration and cannot be surveyed.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 78.

¹²⁵⁵ Buber, *I and Thou*, 79.

¹²⁵⁶ Buber paradoxically claims that, “Men [and women] do not find God if they stay in the world. They do not [God] if they leave the world. He [or she] who goes out with his [or her] whole being to meet his [or her] *Thou* and carries to it all being that is in the world, finds [God] who cannot be sought.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 79.

¹²⁵⁷ Buber writes, “To look away from the world, or to stare at it, does not help a man [or woman] to reach God; but he [or she] who sees the world in [God] stand in [God’s] presence. ‘Here world, there God’ is the language of *It*; ‘God in the world’ is another language of *It*; but to eliminate or leave behind nothing at all, to include the whole world in the *Thou*, to give the world its due and its truth, to include nothing beside God but everything in [God] – this is full and complete relation.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 79.

map, destiny is within one's control. The expectation is that one will find what one seeks. Concerning God, the treasure is a fool's gold. This fool's gold is accepted as the real thing. This fool's gold is comfortable, easy, and predictable. For the one who seeks, the validity of the gold makes little difference. It looks like the real thing, and for some that is all that matters. This treasure brings a certain satisfaction. However, the real treasure never needed to be found. It was never lost, moreover what one sought was never there. The *Thou* does not exist as thing waiting to be found.¹²⁵⁸ The real treasure is seeing the present in light of the *Thou*.

One does not seek the *Thou*.¹²⁵⁹ Concerning God, Buber contends, "It is a finding without seeking, a discovering of the primal, of origin."¹²⁶⁰ The *I-It* is based on control. Impatient, the *I* does not wait for the *It*. Unwilling to wait, the *I* goes forth in confidence and belief. The *I* will not be denied the *It*. The *I-Thou*, on the other hand, is built on the idea of waiting. The *I* waits to be found by the *Thou*. Through waiting, the *I* discovers, that "this finding is not the end, but only the eternal middle, of the way."¹²⁶¹ The *I-It* works towards completion, thus exhausting the *It* of all its mysteries. The *I-Thou*, on the other hand, is freeing. It is a relationship without limits. Each partner increases the freedom of the other. Both enjoy the possibilities, potentiality, and freedom opened by the other.¹²⁶²

¹²⁵⁸ Or as Buber maintains, "God cannot be inferred in anything – in nature, say, as its author, or in history as its master, or in the subject as the self that is thought in it." Buber, *I and Thou*, 80.

¹²⁵⁹ Buber argues that "actually there is no such thing as seeking God, for there is nothing in which [God] could not be found." Buber, *I and Thou*, 80.

¹²⁶⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 80.

¹²⁶¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 80.

¹²⁶² Buber writes that "in pure relation you have felt yourself to be simply dependent, as you are able to feel in no other relation – and simply free, too, as in no other time or place: you have felt yourself to be both creaturely and creative. You had the one feeling then no longer limited by the other, but you had both of them limitlessly and together." Buber, *I and Thou*, 82.

The *I-Thou* is a dynamic relationship. As a dynamic relationship the integrity of both parties is upheld.¹²⁶³ A dynamic relationship depends on both giving, sharing, and interacting.¹²⁶⁴ Both parties confront one another, as such neither withdraws nor dominates the other. Instead, both live in the now, in the *presentness* of each other's being. As a result, the present moment is filled with meaning so that nothing beyond the now holds the same seriousness.¹²⁶⁵

Reality is found in the present action. The now is what matters most. Action holds the full depth and breadth of meaning.¹²⁶⁶ The now has a direct impact on the nature and shape of reality, thus molding what occurs in the present. It is not just action alone. Rather it is mutual action that connects the *I* to the *Thou*.¹²⁶⁷ The *I-Thou* exist for and with one another. What is done by one, directly impacts the other. Neither party can act on its own without direct and present consequences. Mutual action unites the *I-Thou* in a lived reality.¹²⁶⁸ As a union, the *I-Thou* are united by their present action. Such action brings each closer to the other and present reality. Consequently the *I-Thou* relationship

¹²⁶³ The relationship does not devolve the *I-Thou* into a false unity. A unity that would violate the individuality of each. The *I-Thou* relationship cannot exist if one party is absorbed into the other. Thus the whole person, without separation or absorption, has to stand before the *Thou*.

¹²⁶⁴ See when Buber writes, "What the ecstatic man calls union is the enrapturing dynamic of relation, not a unity arisen in the moment of the world's time that dissolves the *I* and the *Thou*, but the dynamic of relation itself, which can put itself before its bearer as the steadily confront one another, and cover each from the feeling of the other enraptured one." Buber, *I and Thou*, 87.

¹²⁶⁵ Buber asks, "What does it help my soul that it can be withdrawn anew from this world here into unity, when this world itself has of necessity no part in the unity – what does all 'enjoyment of God' profit a life that is rent in two? If that abundantly rich heavenly moment has nothing to do with my poor earthly moment – what has it then to do with me, who have still to live, in all seriousness still to live, on earth?" Buber, *I and Thou*, 87.

¹²⁶⁶ Buber argues, "Reality exists only in effective action, its power and depth in power and depth of effective action." Buber, *I and Thou*, 89.

¹²⁶⁷ Buber states, "The most powerful and the deepest reality exists where everything enters into the effective action, without reserve the whole man [or woman] and God the all-embracing – the united *I* and the boundless *Thou*. Buber *I and Thou*, 89.

¹²⁶⁸ Buber describes the union stating, "The united *I*: for in lived reality there is (as I have already said) the becoming one of the soul, the concentration of power, the decisive moment for a man [or woman]. But this does not involve, like that absorption, disregard of the real person." Buber, *I and Thou*, 89.

pushes each party toward the world rather than away from it. As such, the *I-Thou* places itself in world, living in the meaningful moment of present mutual action.

The *I-Thou* relationship dwells in the world.¹²⁶⁹ It embraces the world as part of its own being.¹²⁷⁰ The *I-It* is also bound to it. This part of the *I-Thou*'s irony. The *I*'s freedom is found in that which binds it.¹²⁷¹ The *I* is set free in the world by the power of the *Thou*. The *I* is free when it no longer sees the world as an *It*. The objectification, or *thingification*, of the world binds not only the object, but the objectifier as well. The world remains other, thus becoming dead to the *I*. In return, the *I* is bound to its dead object. Thus the *I* is unable to move beyond its own objectifying. It sees no possibilities or openness, and thus remains closed to the world and itself. The *Thou* frees the *I* to see the possibilities that exist in the world. Through the *Thou*, the *I* sees its own self as part of that world. Instead of an object, the *I* sees a living reality.¹²⁷² The *I* sees the world as the dwelling place of the *Thou*, and the world becomes the meeting place of God.¹²⁷³

The *I-Thou* relationship is lived. Buber writes that “the situation is that it is lived, and nothing but lived, continually, ever anew, without foresight, without forethought,

¹²⁶⁹ The *Thou* does not ask the *I* to leave the world. To ask or require the *I* to leave the world would be tantamount to dividing its being. Instead the *Thou* does precisely the opposite. The *I-Thou* is a freeing relationship. It is a relationship that opens possibilities, both for one another and in the world.

¹²⁷⁰ See for example when Buber writes, “Certainly the world ‘dwells’ in me as an image, just as I dwell in it as a thing. But it is not for that reason in me, just as I am not in it. The world and I are mutually included, the one in the other.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 93.

¹²⁷¹ Buber explains the irony stating, “This contradiction in thought, inherent in the situation of *It*, is resolved in the situation of *Thou*, which sets me free from the world in order to bind me up in solidarity of connexion with it.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 94.

¹²⁷² According to Buber, “Only he [or she] who believes in the world I given power to enter into dealings with it, and if he [or she] gives himself [or herself] to this he [or she] cannot remain godless. If only we love the real world...if only we venture to surround it with the arms of our spirit, our hands will meet hands that grip them.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 94-95.

¹²⁷³ Buber states, “I know nothing of a ‘world’ and a ‘life in the world’ that might separate a man from God. What is thus described is actually life with an alienated world of *It*, which experiences and uses. He [or she] who truly goes out to meet the world goes out also to God.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 95.

without prescription, in the totality of its antinomy.”¹²⁷⁴ The *I-Thou* is neither occupied by the past nor concerned about the future. Instead, the *I-Thou* embraces the present. Thus in mutual action, *I-Thou* lives in the reality of the moment. It is not that the past and the future are unimportant. The past and future serve as extensions of the present. The past founds the present, while the future holds the destiny of the present. Neither the past nor future exist without the present. Present action builds on present action. The now lives as a series of *nows*. Present action suggests future possibilities built on the successive action of each now. What is perceived as the past and the future is in actuality the same present continually in motion.

The perception of the past, present, and future marks the difference between the world of the *It* and the *Thou*.¹²⁷⁵ The *It* controls the past and sets the course for the future. The *Thou*, on the other hand, is content to remain present. The world of the *Thou*, is the everlasting new. The now remains forever new.¹²⁷⁶ In the *Thou*, one learns to appreciate each moment. Life’s diverse moments and exchanges are encompassed under the *Thou*’s unity. The *Thou* does not dominate the present like a tyrant. The present is not forced upon the *I*. Instead, the *Thou* graciously guides the *I* into the ever unfolding present. The *Thou* invites the *I* into the totality of the present. The *I* enters this relationship without leaving anything behind, bringing all its spheres of relation into its relationship with the *Thou*.¹²⁷⁷ Every moment, interaction, and relationship is brought into the presence of the

¹²⁷⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 95.

¹²⁷⁵ Buber explains, “The world of *It* is set in the context of space and time. The world of *Thou* is not set in the context of either of these.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 100.

¹²⁷⁶ Buber argues that “in pure relation potential being is simply actual being as it draws breath, and in it the *Thou* remains present.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 100.

¹²⁷⁷ There three spheres of relation according to Buber. He writes, “First, our life with nature, in which the relation clings to the threshold of speech. Second, our life with [humanity], in which the relation

eternal *Thou*. The *Thou* shines its light onto the life of the *I*, illuminating its entire being. So much so that it encounters the present presence of the *Thou* everywhere. The *Thou* brings a sudden awareness of *presentness* of each moment. The *I-Thou* relationship is an immersive awareness of the *Thou's* eternal presence,¹²⁷⁸ bringing the fragmented life into unity. All the alienated aspects of the individual existence find a new unity in the *Thou*. The *I*, previously broken and estranged, finds a wholeness in the one present of the *Thou*.¹²⁷⁹ In such a presence, Buber writes, “what confronts us has blossomed into the full reality of the *Thou*. Here alone, then, as reality that cannot be lost, are gazing and being gazed upon, knowing and being known, loving and being loved.”¹²⁸⁰

The *I* gazes into the eyes of the *Thou*. In return, the *Thou* gazes back. There is something familiar about this gaze. It is like recognizing someone across a crowded room. At first one is unsure if the other really is who one thinks he or she is. There is a moment of hesitation as one crosses the room toward the other, unwilling to fully commit in fear of being wrong. One wants to avoid embarrassment. That fear starts to wash away as one moves closer. One has found their friend and all that fear has been forgotten. The *I* and the *Thou* confront one another not as strangers, but as familiar friends. However the

takes on the form of speech. Third, our life with spiritual beings, where the relation, being without speech, yet begets it.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 101.

¹²⁷⁸ Writing on the experience of the *Thou*, Buber explains, “In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us, we look out toward the fringe of the eternal *Thou*; in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal *Thou*; in each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*. Buber, *I and Thou*, 101.

¹²⁷⁹ Buber states, “Through every sphere shines the one present.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 101.

¹²⁸⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 103.

gaze does not end at friendship. In the gaze of the *Thou*, the *I* confronts its long lost lover. The *I* falls into its lovers gaze. In love, the *I* meets its God.¹²⁸¹

Nothing about this meeting is simple. It is both easy and difficult at the same time. Describing meeting, Buber writes, “At times it is like a light breath, at times like a wrestling-bout, but always – it *happens*.”¹²⁸² The meeting between *I* and *Thou* is bound to happen. One cannot prevent this meeting nor hide from it. The *Thou* will confront the *I*, not as experience, but as relationship.¹²⁸³ Invoking or creating this meeting is not the problem. One has no choice over when, where, and how this meeting will occur. The *I* is destined to encounter its *Thou*. However, this meeting is not always recognized. The *I-It* experience dominates perception, so that all meetings are placed in this framework. The relationship of *I-Thou* is mistakenly perceived as an *I-It*.¹²⁸⁴

Being undefinable, *I-Thou* is difficult to discern. One knows there is a meeting, but understanding that meeting is beyond human comprehension. One knows that in meeting the *Thou*, something remarkable has happened. Meaning is there, under the surface, but it remains elusive. One’s instinct is to search for this meaning objectively. In the *I-It*, one desires to know and understand the meaning of it all. All of one’s resources are deployed to find this meaning. Despite all that one does, this search for meaning is

¹²⁸¹ Human relations reflect God’s relation with humanity. See Buber when he states, “The relation with man is the real simile of the relation with God; in it true address received true response; except that in God’s response everything, the universe, is made manifest as language.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 103.

¹²⁸² Buber, *I and Thou*, 109.

¹²⁸³ This meeting, Buber argues, “is not an ‘experience’ that stirs in the receptive soul and grows to perfect blessedness; rather, in that moment something happens to the [human].” Buber, *I and Thou*, 109.

¹²⁸⁴ The *I-Thou* is replaced by the *I-It*. One objectifies the *Thou*. Buber explains that “the source of this new thing is classified in scientific orientation of the world, its authorised efforts to establish an unbroken causality, we, whose concern is real consideration of the real, cannot have our purpose served with subconsciousness or any other apparatus of the soul.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 109.

unsatisfying.¹²⁸⁵ One searches above and beyond for this meaning, but it escapes one's grasp. The irony is that one never had to search for this meaning. The meaning was, or rather *is*, there already. This meaning is not above or beyond one's life. It is, in fact, already present in one's life. Meaning lives in the now, that is present action.¹²⁸⁶ Meaning is already there in every person and action. This meaning waits patiently for its chance to be born into the world. Humans and their actions do not create meaning. They are the midwives of meaning.¹²⁸⁷

Meaning is born in present, in the relationship of the *I-Thou*. Once born, this meaning stands before the *I*. Meaning announces and makes itself known.¹²⁸⁸ Face-to-face with mystery, the *I* enters into this mystery, not to solve it, but to live in it. In mystery, Buber states, "We have come near to God, but not nearer to unveiling being or solving its riddle. We have felt release, but not discovered a 'solution.'"¹²⁸⁹ This is the paradox of the *Thou*. Despite the closeness, one is no closer to solving the mystery. The *I-Thou* is inexpressible, undefinable, and unpredictable. This is frustrating for the *I*, which seeks to define and solve all mysteries.¹²⁹⁰ It matters not that this is the mystery of

¹²⁸⁵ Buber describes this dilemma stating, "You do not know how to exhibit and define the meaning of life, you have no formula or picture for it, and yet it has more certitude for you than the perceptions of your senses." Buber, *I and Thou*, 110.

¹²⁸⁶ One expects the search for meaning to be hard, and that is not to say it is not. Meaning is obviously difficult to discern. Yet, one makes it all the more difficult by searching anywhere and everywhere for this meaning. See for example when Buber writes that "this meaning is not that of 'another life,' but that of this life of ours, not one of a world 'yonder' but that of this world of ours, and it desires its confirmation in the life and in relation with this world. This meaning can be received, but not experienced; it cannot be experience but it can be done, and this is its purpose with us." Buber, *I and Thou*, 111.

¹²⁸⁷ Meaning is born not created. Concerning meaning, Buber writes, "The assurance I have of it does not wish to be sealed within me, but it wishes to be born by me into world." Buber, *I and Thou*, 111.

¹²⁸⁸ This announcement does not lessen the mystery. Instead one is brought face-to-face with a mystery that remains mystery.

¹²⁸⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 111.

¹²⁹⁰ Humanity is not content with mystery. Buber explains that one "is not content with the inexpressible confirmation of meaning, but wants to see this confirmation stretched out as something that can be continually taken up and handled, a continuum unbroken in space and time that insures [one's] life at every point and every moment." Buber, *I and Thou*, 113.

the *Thou*, of God. This is fact drives the *I* to solve all the more. The *I* desires to solve the *Thou* by whatever means possible, even if that means transforming God into an object.¹²⁹¹ The *I* seeks to bring the *Thou* into space and time.¹²⁹²

The desire to objectify God comes is a misunderstanding of the encounter itself. The irony is that the more one defines God, the further one moves away God. This is because the *I* misunderstands the purpose of the search. The purpose of the search was never to find God. Instead, as Buber explains, “Meeting with God does not come to [humanity] in order that [one] may concern [oneself] with God, but in order that [one] may confirm that there is meaning in the world.”¹²⁹³ One who searches for God will in fact miss God.¹²⁹⁴ The search for God will inevitable make God into an object.¹²⁹⁵

The search for God is rather not a search at all. It is instead an embrace of the now.¹²⁹⁶ It is an entering into a relationship with the present. Thus God is not found, but

¹²⁹¹ According to Buber, “[One’s] thirst for continuity is unsatisfied by the life-rhythm of pure relation, the interchange of actual being and of potential being...[One] longs for extension in time, for duration. Thus God becomes an object of faith. At first faith, set in time, completes the acts of relation; but gradually it replaces them.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 113.

¹²⁹² Or as Buber explains, “[One] longs for extension in space, for the representation in which the community of the faithful is united with its God.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 114.

¹²⁹³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 115.

¹²⁹⁴ See for example where Buber writes that “the man [or woman] who seeks God...instead of allowing the gift to work itself out, reflects about the Giver – misses both.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 116.

¹²⁹⁵ Or as Buber describes it, “Reflexion, on the other hand, makes God into an object. Its apparent turning towards the primal source belongs in truth to the universal movement away from it.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 116.

¹²⁹⁶ See Richard Rohr. As he puts it, “The belief that God is ‘out there,’ is the basic dualism that is tearing us all apart. That’s why we have raped the earth, why we have such poor understanding of our bodies, our economy, and our health. That’s why we live such distraught and divided lives. What is worse is that Jesus came precisely to put it all together. He said, ‘This, the human, is good. The material, the physical can be trusted This world is the hiding place of God and the revelation of God.’ We believe, for example, in the resurrection of the *body*, which says material and physical realities are a part of the mystery. It is not just an accident or a mistake or a burden. This bodily self, this physical world, participates in whatever it is that God is doing.” Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 119.

encountered in the presence of the other.¹²⁹⁷ The world is the place of encounter. The world is realm of the *I-Thou*, and therefore the realm of God.

Thou, the Present, and Ritual Action

Theology is a relationship. It exists as the dynamic mutual sharing of the *I-Thou*. In this manner it is unique. Theology cannot stand apart from the object of its study.¹²⁹⁸ It cannot exist outside of its *Thou*, theology has no meaning outside the *I-Thou* relationship. It is unable to hold the other at a distance so as to better examine it as would as science. Theology cannot exist as a science or as a discipline, having the ability to determine its own course and fate. The illusion that theology charts its own path is a tantamount to living in a delusion. Theology is done under the precept that is it something that it is not. It is doing philosophy by another name. Despite this theology is still considered a discipline, but its status as a discipline is questionable.¹²⁹⁹ As a relationship theology is less a discipline and more so a meeting with the *Thou*. Theology is an entering into relationship, and therefore its actions model relationship that relationship. This is not just any relationship. Theology is confronted by the ultimate *Thou*. It is the *Thou* that confronts all persons. The *Thou* of all others in every present moment and time. Theology

¹²⁹⁷ Buber declares that one “can do justice to the relation with God in which he [or she] has come to share only if he [or she] realises God anew in the world according to his [or her] strength and to the measure of each day.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 114.

¹²⁹⁸ Unlike other disciplines, say for example philosophy.

¹²⁹⁹ Pattison is critical of theology as a discipline. He suggests to, “[a]bolish free-standing, independent theology and religious studies departments. This will force those who are trained and interested in religious ideas, traditions and insights to work at them in the interdisciplinary market place of ideas.” Pattison continues, “Wherever possible, avoid the use of the self-ghettoizing term ‘theology.’ Theology is a vague and pluralistic term anyway. Often it adds nothing to debate and its use may be ideologically obfuscating. The designation of discourse as theological allows people prematurely to ignore insights that they might otherwise find useful. ‘Theology’ has too much ideological and historical baggage attached to it. Those theologians who want their ideas to be taken seriously in the public arena should eschew pigeonholing themselves by using it.” Stephen Pattison, *The Challenge of Practical Theology* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 223; 224.

is confronted by and enters into a relationship with this *Thou*. Theology lives in relationship with the now.

Theology lives in the now or rather the reality of the present. Its gaze moves toward the other in the *presentness* of being or more specifically being-with. This relationship does not compel theology into a forceful gaze. Theology is not forced to do anything against its nature or purpose. Instead, by being in relationship with the *Thou*, theology is opened towards the present. The *Thou* opens the eyes of theology, thus helping it to see wherein its purpose lies. The gaze of theology is neither the past nor future. Its gaze is the present, where it neither seeks nor controls.

Theology carries a heavy weight.¹³⁰⁰ Theology longs for the past and dreams of the future, but it misses the present. Only in the present is theology able to be freed. The *Thou*, the other, sets theology free. Theology is set free to live in the present with its *Thou*. In the presence of the *Thou* theology finally discovers how to *be*. Theology discovers how to *be* in its present moment of mutuality with its *Thou*. Theology learns how to *be* when it has ceased be for *itself*. The *Thou* moves theology's gaze toward the other. *Thou* teaches theology to see the other. In the other, theology gazes upon its *Thou*. Theology discovers the God it has so passionately sought after.

¹³⁰⁰ It carries the weight of discipline. The burden and constant need to justify and prove itself academically as a discipline. It thus carries the burden of justification. It is burdened by its own search for relevance and meaning. It is burdened by its own will to exist. Theology is constrained by its own need to *be*. Where other disciplines find meaning in the search, theology finds frustration. Unlike science, mathematics, or even psychology, theology lacks the gratification of ultimate discovery. That is because the object of its search, God, remains unfathomable. This is not to say that theology lacks gratification, far from it! Yet there is a remarkable difference between itself and the sciences. Theology cannot find its own Higgs boson, nor will it ever find it. It searches above and beyond for it, but this furthers theology's burden. The lack of discovery has become the bane of its existence. The constant need to search outside of itself remains forever unsatisfied.

The gaze of the *Thou* lives in the gaze of others. The present, the world of the other, is a place of meeting and activity. These others, whom theology has ignored, are finally seen as bearers of meaning. Their actions and behaviors are seen in a new light. People become the meeting place of the *Thou*, and the importance of their actions is finally recognized. Theology is renewed with a sense of purpose through people. It is renewed with a vision beyond the self. With the help of the *Thou*, theology learns to see others as partners rather than objects. A meeting of strangers becomes a meeting of lovers. Theology becomes a matter of falling in love with people.

Theology does not save the world. Theology is saved by the world. It is saved by the world in order to be for the world. This is what the *Thou* shows theology. Theology finds itself in the work it does for and with others. Theology ought to be a theology of the people or nothing at all. It should concern itself with the things that people do, their actions and behaviors. Being theology is also being-with. Therefore theology is a matter of acting, working, and being-with others.¹³⁰¹

Relationship thus makes ritual action immensely important to theology. Ritual action is the mutual action between the *I-Thou*, theology and God. Ritual action serves as the dynamic flux, the instable element, in an *I-Thou* theology. Theology lives in the moment of mutual relationship and change between itself, the other, and God. Ritual action, the outward giving and receiving of relationship, serves as the catalyst of the now. Ritual action is the embodiment of the present. Ritual action keeps wayward eyes from drifting too far beyond the now. Ritual action participants are drawn towards the *Thou*.

¹³⁰¹ Theology's Higgs boson, so to speak, is neither in metaphysics nor semiotics. The theological Higgs boson is not a thing, object, or even God. The Higgs boson theology seeks, or rather encounters, is people and their actions.

Theology's relationship is thus twofold. Ritual action draws the gaze of theology toward the other, the participants of ritual. This pull toward the other is also a pull towards the *Thou*. Ritual action is mutually dynamic and changing. This mutual dynamic relationship saves theology, thus freeing it for relationship. Theology is saved to become the expression and embodiment of the *I-Thou*. As such, theology is saved for relationship in order to *become* relationship itself. Ritual action teaches theology to becoming the living, dynamic, and mutual embodiment of the *I-Thou*.

The present saves theology from the need to objectify. Theology no longer sees the past or the future. Instead, theology lives in the fullness of the present. When theology no longer sees the past or the future it is saved from turning people and action into objects. No longer preoccupied with the past or future, theology can focus on the present moment. As a result, theology is able to know the other deeply and personally. When the other is no longer an object or a thing, theology can form personal relationships. Theology as relationship is only possible if it is a theology of the present. This is by necessity for there is nothing to relate to beyond the present. The past and future, at least for theology, do not exist.

One cannot form a relationship with the ghost of the past or the potential of the future. That is not to say the past and future are unimportant for theological understanding. Nevertheless the temptation exists to either stay in one or the other. One can dwell comfortably in the past without much concern for the present. In addition, one can crave for a future that does not exist. Perhaps this future will exist, but not yet.¹³⁰² Accordingly to enter the present does not require one to throw away either the past or the

¹³⁰² And the 'perhaps' is both the point and not the point.

future. The past and future are brought into the present. What has happened and what will happen become the domain of the present. The past and future are brought into the relationship with the present. People, their pasts and futures, meet and dwell in the present. The action of the present is simultaneously the action of the past and future. The present is not a vacuum, but rather the place of dynamic interaction of what has been and what is to come. In a matter of speaking, the past and future are brought into fruition in the present. The heritage and destinies of people find their fulfillment in the present. People do not exist in either the past or the future. They exist in the now. Therefore the fullness of their being, including their actions, is only possible in the present. One cannot *be* in either the past or future, nor can one act in either the past or future. One can only *be* and act in the present. *Presentness* is the fullness of being. One cannot *be* anymore than they are right now at this very moment.

Therefore any theological relationship can only exist in the present. Theology knows no other people beyond the present moment. Such a theology can only engage with people in the here and now. Thus theological relationship is contingent on entering into fullness of the present. Theology, if it is to be in any sense relational, should be rooted in the present moment. What is happening now is therefore a theological imperative. The imperative of the now is the imperative of action. Action defines the present. The present is always a matter of doing, the present is ever unfolding. The present is incapable of remaining still. It continues to push forward into eternity. One's own personal present will inevitably end in death, but that eternal present remains forever. The present continues to act. A relational practical theology should therefore bind itself to the present. Theology binds itself to the present through personal

relationship. The other and their actions become part of theology itself. That is theology is no longer seen as separate from the things people do. What people do, their actions and behaviors, becomes theology itself. The present becomes a theological present.

The theological present can only occur once theology lets go of its *I-It* mentality. Theology will always be on the outside, an invader, as long as people and action are objectified. An outsider theology lives outside the present and is thus increasingly irrelevant. Theology does not belong in the world of the *I-It* and objectification. Even though this is where many theologians want to dwell. The *I-It* world is comfortable and easy, but it is also increasingly hostile. Theology does not belong in the *I-It* world. It is not a place where it can survive.¹³⁰³

A relational practical theology dwells in the theological present where it can thrive *with* rather than apart. As such, engaging ritual action becomes theology's gateway into the present. Ritual action becomes more than an object of study, it is a place of encounter and relationship. Ritual action embodies the present because it can only occur in the present. Ritual action cannot be done apart from its appointed moment. That is ritual action is unable to exist in either the past or the future. When ritual action occurs, it occurs in the now. As such it carries with the very idea of *presentness*. Ritual action's *presentness* is the key to theology's own *presentness*. Theology learns to be relational by learning from the relational. Ritual action is an opportunity for meeting. Theology places itself before action itself, the present, in order to become the present. Becoming the present means engaging and learning from the present. Ritual action is an opportunity

¹³⁰³ The *I-It* world is a natural fit for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), psychology and the social sciences, and even philosophy. Theology struggles where these thrive. Whereas these should objectively, and quite correctly, stand apart from their subject, theology cannot do so. Theology has to defend itself and its need to exist in such a world. It remains a stranger in a strange land.

to learn from the present. This means a fundamental shift in theological perspective. Rather than investigating ritual action, theology learns from it. There is a reversal of roles in the present. Ritual action is the teacher and theology is the learner. Entering the present means letting go of what one knows. To say that ritual action is theology's *gateway to the present* is another way of saying that ritual action is theology's teacher.

Living in the present means that theologians learn from the ritual participants. Theologians lose their privileged status as experts. The present means doing away with experts and objects. Ritual action is no longer something studied. It loses the stigma of being an object or thing. Ritual action, embodying the present, ushers theologians into the present. Ritual action beckons one to enter into its world. It calls the theologian to experience its reality. Moreover it calls the theologian to go beyond experience. The reality of the present beckons the theologian to enter into relationship. The theologian's role is redefined in the relationship of the present. Ritual action ushers the theologian into a new and more fulfilling role as *Thou*. The goal of the theologian is to be *Thou*. The theologian is a *Thou* for the world. The present is the meeting place of the *Thou* for both the theologian and the world. They meet their *Thou* in each other. In return, they embody the *Thou* for the other. Ritual action does not just usher the theologian into the present. Ritual action ushers one into a relationship with God.

A Lesson for Theology

The goal cannot be to explain or even interpret the OFWB ordinance of the washing of the saints' feet. Foot washing was never the focus per se, yet paradoxically, foot washing has had everything to do with this work. Foot washing is not just something one investigates. It is something that informs and changes everything one does, including

the theologian. Foot washing exemplifies an action that refuses objectification, as do all ritual actions. Thus foot washing reversed the roles between the theologian and the people. In the end, foot washing determined the course of theology.

Foot washing demonstrates the importance of allowing ritual action to speak on its own. The OFWB never required a theologian to tell them what their ritual actions mean. Their actions were already meaningful. Foot washing does not need its meaning explained or created. All that is needed is the space and opportunity to allow this practice to speak for itself. Foot washing was never silent or mute. The meaning was already speaking and had been doing so for generations. The practice speaks through OFWBs. Foot washing speaks through the OFWB use of stories, experiences, and actions. Foot washing speaks each time it is practice. Therefore the role of the theologian is not to fill in the gap of meaning. Nor is it to search and dig for meaning as if meaning were a buried treasure. The theologian does not run away from the practice itself. Foot washing speaks and the theologian listens. The theologian listens to the action through its participants and their actions. One opens oneself to ritual action by entering into relationship.

OFWB foot washing is itself a model of such openness and relationship. It embraces the other, the stranger, as does the theologian in interpretation. Thus foot washing serves as a metaphor for the theologian. It becomes the means by which interpretation is redefined. The interpreted becomes the interpreter. OFWBs redefine theology and interpretation in conversation with the theologian. The theologian learns from the other and vice versa. Ritual action speaks to the theologian and thus helps to shape his or her theological perspective. Ritual action is therefore more than something

one experiences. It is a means of participating and entering into relationship with the people of the practice. The practice explains how theology should be.

The OFWB practice of foot washing thus enters into a partnership with theology. That is foot washing and theology share one and the same action. Foot washing and theology wash the feet of the other. For OFWBs this is literal whereas for theology it is metaphorical. Both share the same meaning of opening and humbling themselves toward the other. Ultimately both are learning to serve the other. In this sense, foot washing is the physical manifestation of theology. A relational practical theology, is washing feet. Theology washes the feet of others when theologians open themselves to the experiences and conversations of the other. Theology washes the feet of others when theologians enter into relationship with the other. A relational practical theology is a theology of foot washing.

In foot washing one also allow one's feet to be washed by another. A relational practical theology suggests the same mentality. A theologian serves the world. It is harder to think how the world might serve theology. As OFWBs explained, serving was often easier than being served. So to be served by the world is challenging for the theologian. In a relational practical theology it is entirely necessary. The world comes to the theologian so that their voice can be heard. Sometimes it is not enough to listen to the other. One needs to be the voice of the other. The world serves theology by lending its voice.

For the most part, the story of OFWB foot washing has remained untold. Of course this is not to say this ritual action was silent. The impact it has had on the lives, experiences, and relationships of OFWBs has been monumental. Foot washing has

changed both OFWB laypersons and pastors. In this sense foot washing has been heard. Foot washing also speaks beyond the OFWB toward the world outside. This voice can be hard to hear in a noisy world. The small size and relatively obscurity of foot washing means that unless one is listening, it is not likely to be heard. It does not mean that this voice, small as it is, is unimportant. On the contrary, volume does not equal importance. Even the smallest of voices can have powerful meanings. Theology is served when these voices lend themselves to the theology. These voices put their trust in the theologian, hoping that he or she will make appropriate and correct use of their voices. The voice is the gift. This is why one can say that the world serves theology. People give their voices to the theologian, thus enriching the theological enterprise. The theologian is served by the people. The people, their voices and experiences, wash the theologian's feet. The theologian washes their feet in return by magnifying that voice. The theologian helps to make that voice heard. The theologian magnifies that meaning so that it can be heard. The theologian amplifies the voices of the people, making them heard far and wide.

Foot washing is remarkable in the ways it has unified and shaped the OFWB. Foot washing is the OFWB present, and thus the convergence of both the OFWB past and future. Foot washing carries the OFWB ever forward in the continual living moment of the now. Generation after generation of OFWBs experience this ritual action. More importantly, OFWBs enter into relationship with the divine and in each other through foot washing. Foot washing is the OFWB gateway to relationship. It is their model of the *I-Thou*.

Until We Meet Again...

Foot washing shifts one's perspective from analysis to relationship. As a work of practical theology, the purpose of this work was to enter into relationship with the people of foot washing. One can hope that this was a success, however marginal. Start to finish, this work is deeply influenced by the OFWB. The OFWB have surely washed the theologian's feet. Whether hermeneutics or postmodernism, deconstruction or social theory, this work is deeply indebted to the OFWB and their ritual action of foot washing. Each line is an attempt to give a voice to the deep meanings of OFWB foot washing. In this manner, one can only hope that the feet of the OFWB have also been washed. This washing and being washed defines a relational practical theology. It offers a truly human path to human redemption:

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 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. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."¹³⁰⁴

¹³⁰⁴ *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, John 13:12-17.

Appendix One: Questionnaire Letter

Original Free Will Baptist Friends,

Hello my name is Jonathan Best. I am an OFWB minister and Ph.D. doctoral candidate in Practical Theology at St. Thomas University in Miami, FL. I am a graduate of both Mouth Olive College and Campbell University Divinity School. My home church is Free Union OFWB Church in Pinetown, NC. I currently live in North Miami Beach, FL with my wife Rebekah.

I am cordially inviting you to participate in a research study on the OFWB practice and experience of foot washing. I am using the OFWB practice of foot washing as a case study for interpreting the impact worship practices have religious communities. I am conducting this research for my dissertation and would greatly value your perspectives and experiences. In this packet I have included fifteen questionnaires that will help me gather the data I need to begin my research. If the members of your church, including the pastor, could complete the enclosed questionnaires I would greatly appreciate it. Once completed, all participants should sign the consent form and return the questionnaires in the enclosed pre-paid envelope provided. Thank you for your participation.

In Christ,

Rev. Jonathan L. Best

Appendix Three: Questionnaire Letter (Online Version)

Original Free Will Baptist Friends,

Hello my name is Jonathan Best. I am an OFWB minister and Ph.D. doctoral candidate in Practical Theology at St. Thomas University in Miami, FL. I am a graduate of both Mouth Olive College and Campbell University Divinity School. My home church is Free Union OFWB Church in Pinetown, NC. I currently live in North Miami Beach, FL with my wife Rebekah.

I am cordially inviting you to participate in a research study on the OFWB practice and experience of foot washing. I am using the OFWB practice of foot washing as a case study for interpreting the impact worship practices have on religious communities. I am conducting this research for my dissertation and would greatly value your perspectives and experiences. If you could complete the online questionnaires I would greatly appreciate it. Please click the link below to begin. Thank you for your participation!

In Christ,

Rev. Jonathan L. Best
Ph.D. Candidate

To begin please click this link:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/12CfscZTqQnD0Ze38oejqICeN--VP8DVZGeJo4Wi8yTc/viewform?usp=send_form

Would you be willing to participate in a personal interview? Please include the following contact information so that I can get in touch with you.

Name

Phone Number

Email

Address (If applicable)

Appendix Five: Interview Request Letter

Dear, _____

Hello my name is Jonathan Best. I am a Free Will Baptist minister and Ph.D. candidate in Practical Theology at St. Thomas University in Miami, FL. A few months ago you responded to a questionnaire on the practice of foot washing within our denomination. I want to thank you for your participation in the questionnaire. Your comments were extremely helpful for my dissertation and research.

In the questionnaire, you indicated that you would be willing to participating in a personal interview. The goal of this interview is to gather your experiences and perspectives of foot washing as a member of our denomination. This interview will help me better understand ritual and how it shapes Christian communities and individuals.

The interview will be conducted over the telephone. I know your time is valuable, so I plan to limit this conversation to no longer than an hour. This interview will be scheduled for a time that is convenient for you. If you are still willing to be interviewed, reply to this email and we will arrange an interview. I look forward to hearing back from you!

In Christ,

Rev. Jonathan L. Best

Appendix Six: Foot Washing Focus Group Announcement

Celebrating Washing of the Saints' Feet

You're cordially invited to a special celebration of washing of the saints' feet! On Sunday June 28th, [REDACTED] OFWB and the Rev. Jonathan L. Best will be hosting a special discussion on foot washing. Rev. Best is conducting a study of our ordinance as a part of his doctoral dissertation. He is looking for pastors and members of the OFWB community willing to share their experiences, stories, and thoughts on this ordinance.

Rev. Best is seeking to understand the ways this ordinance has helped to shape our Christian and denominational identity. In order to do this, Rev. Best needs your perspectives and stories. In what should be a time of fun and fellowship, Rev. Best hopes to gain a better perspective on what makes the OFWB special.

Following the discussions you are invited to attend a special foot washing service hosted by the Rev. [REDACTED] and the congregation of [REDACTED]. The service promises to be a time of fellowship, community, and celebration. Light refreshments will be served after the service.

The event officially begins at 3:00 PM, but special arrangements can be made for those who can only meet a specific times.

For more information and details please contact Rev. Jonathan L. Best at [REDACTED].com ([REDACTED]) or [REDACTED] at

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