

New Commandment and footwashing Thursday

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Apparently the term “[Maundy Thursday](#)” comes from the [Latin](#) phrase “[mandatum novum](#)” meaning “new commandment.” The reference is to John 13, which features the story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, followed by his statement about a new commandment he has given them, to love one another.

We actually reached this passage in my class on the Gospel of John yesterday, and had an interesting discussion about whether this commandment is “new,” and if so, in what sense.

1 John seems to be aware of the issue, indicating that the new commandment isn’t new. But perhaps the newness relates to the way Jesus made love a priority, allowing for commandments to be prioritized and even in some instances neutralized in relation to the commandments defined as the greatest.

Being able to be both new and old was of course essential to Christianity’s survival. If there was nothing new then it wasn’t worth one’s time. And if it wasn’t old, it wasn’t worth one’s time.

We also talked about the footwashing. [Brian LePort shared](#) some great icons depicting the discomfort of Peter and the other disciples with Jesus’ action. This is my favorite:



What do readers make of the core element of the story – that Jesus washed his disciples' feet – considered from the standpoint of history?

It would be easy to dismiss it. It is only recorded in the Gospel of John, after all. But that is not the only relevant consideration. It fits so well with what we find recorded in the other Gospels – indeed, it sounds more in keeping with the Synoptic Jesus than John's! Moreover, anyone who has lived in a society with an honor/shame values system will understand just how shocking an action like this would be. (Can you imagine a Romanian pastor cleaning a toilet?) It seems more likely that a controversial action like this one would be omitted by early Christian authors, than that it would have been invented.

What do others think about its historicity or otherwise?

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