

# Being Formed in the Time of Jesus Christ: Towards a Renewal of Footwashing in a High-Speed Age

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## **Introduction**

Recent decades have seen a plethora of writing on the late modern experience of time, particularly its accelerated character.<sup>1</sup> Whether academic or popular, many of these works speak of the contemporary age as one in which people experience a “time-squeeze,” or feel as if they live their life on a “hamster wheel” of speed, or find the western pace of life to be a “race against the clock.” While some describe the accelerated late modern “times” as liberating, others regard this sped-up temporality as pathological and demoralizing. In this essay I consider the nature of time in a Christian, liturgical framework, and how this time differs from the time of accelerated contemporary societies.

In this study, human bodies will play a central part. While I discuss bodies labelled as “disabled,” I do so mainly to highlight some pathological elements of contemporary temporality, not to categorize these bodies as “special.” Worship and liturgy also play a central role in the discussion. I argue that the sacramental practice of footwashing exemplifies a contrasting, more authentically Christian time to that of high-speed society, one that does not erase, deny, or forget the body in an accelerated age of virtuality and disembodied relationships. While footwashing has held an important place in some streams of Anabaptist and Mennonite ecclesial life, scholars see a

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<sup>1</sup> For a sample, see Stephen Bertman, *Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998); John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2007); Hartmut Rosa and William E Scheuerman, eds., *High-Speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power, and Modernity* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2009); Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality* (Malmö, Sweden: NSU Press, 2010); Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2013); Mark C. Taylor, *Speed Limits: Where Time Went and Why We Have so Little Left* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2014).

significant recent decline in its practice among these communities.<sup>2</sup> Whether the decline comes through the growing infrequency of footwashing rites, or the lack of participation by church members in regular services, they observe a growing discomfort with, and an incomprehension of, the practice. Against that background, I claim that L'Arche communities—networks comprising people considered intellectually disabled and nondisabled persons who all share their life and faith together—and the L'Arche practice of footwashing offer the church not only an alternative interpretation of worship and liturgy but also a pattern of life that is in keeping with Christian time.

### **High-Speed Society and Social Acceleration**

The German social theorist Hartmut Rosa has written extensively on the social acceleration at the heart of the contemporary world. In *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, Rosa elucidates how at the core of modernity lies an impulse towards growth and speed that is fundamental to its moral project to empower individuals and foster human autonomy. At its heart lies an “impatience” towards static conceptions of history and time, and the employment of conceptions of progress and accelerating technological advancement to facilitate its utopian goals. While modernity from its inception grew out of, and evolved with, speeded-up social processes, Rosa sees a new phase of acceleration occurring in late modernity. Although the accelerating speed of transportation, international trade, and technological development can be discerned as early as the 18th century, he regards its increased velocity and ubiquity to be quantitatively and qualitatively different today. “The exchange or movement of information, money, commodities, and people, or even of ideas and diseases, across large distances is not new,” he says, explaining that “what is new is the *speed* and *lack of resistance* with which such processes transpire.”<sup>3</sup>

For Rosa, what ensues is a massive, pervasive experience of alienation at all levels of society, from the inner life of the individual to national political

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<sup>2</sup> See Keith Graber-Miller, “Mennonite Footwashing: Identity Reflections and Altered Meanings,” *Worship* 66, no. 2 (March 1992): 159; Bob Brenneman, “Embodied Forgiveness: Yoder and the (Body) Politics of Footwashing,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 83, no. 1 (2009): 14-15; Harvey Leddy, “Adaptation and Contestation: Feet Washing in the Church of the Brethren,” *Brethren Life & Thought* 61, no. 1 (2016): 53-54.

<sup>3</sup> Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 214.

systems and broader social institutions. At the level of the individual, Rosa sees alienation happening in various ways: people become alienated from *space* through the eroding of distance through accelerated transportation and the proliferation of computer-driven virtuality; with disposability, a dominant mode of relationship with *things*, people become alienated from, and far less knowledgeable about, objects; late modernity's valorization of virtues such as multitasking produces an alienation from personal *actions*, whereby people never really know what they are doing; the multiplicity of episodes that can be garnered and valued alienates people from *time*, because memory cannot hold and process events into personal experience; people become alienated from *self and others*, because of a proliferation of relationships, leading to a superficiality that impedes the belonging necessary for a stable self.<sup>4</sup> Social acceleration compels people to live lives not of their choosing, and often in ways that do not lead to flourishing and enjoyment.

Although Rosa never mentions it, the human body is implicated in all these dimensions of alienation. Rather than serving as mere tools for the self's race to keep up, bodies participate in the practices and social imaginaries that facilitate and draw from the drive towards speed. The fragmentation and disengagement from reality accompanying late modernity not only impact disembodied selves but are inscribed in bodies of whole persons.

#### *Globalization and Information Technologies: Drivers of Acceleration*

Social acceleration is a complex process encompassing a multitude of personal and social aspects. In order to highlight the body's place in this dynamic, I will focus on two drivers of this acceleration, globalization and information technologies. Media and information theorist Robert Hassan points out how a globalization driven by neoliberal capitalism and the rise of information and computer technologies (ICTs) have acted both as tools and drivers of "high-speed society."<sup>5</sup> It is hard to overestimate the influence of

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<sup>4</sup> Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration*, 83-97.

<sup>5</sup> Hassan has written extensively on the dynamic of speed within modernity and late modernity. See Robert Hassan, *The Chronoscopic Society: Globalization, Time, and Knowledge in the Network Economy* (New York: P. Lang, 2003); Robert Hassan, *The Information Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); Robert Hassan, *Empires of Speed: Time and the Acceleration of Politics and Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Robert Hassan, *The Age of Distraction: Reading, Writing, and Politics in a High-Speed Networked Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction

the industrial revolution and the birth of capitalism as progenitors of the late modern impulse towards speed and progress. While pre-modern peoples and cultures would have understood time in a more “lived” way, as centered in events and relationships, the capitalist class emerging in modernity focused on time as a measurable, abstract quantity totally separated from the social world. This measurable time was a boon for factory owners, who could now assess and orient their workers towards producing as much in as little time as possible. From this form of telling time comes the birth of Benjamin Franklin’s now commonplace aphorism: “time is money.” In modernity time moves from being embedded in social relationships to becoming a commodifiable, abstract exchange value.

By the 19th century social commentators already knew that capital cannot remain still but must continually expand at ever higher speeds.<sup>6</sup> Capitalism’s expansionist and accelerating logic demands a reach into more and more of the world, injecting speed into the time and space of emerging global “markets.” Hassan views this acceleration as reaching its peak in late-modern “network society” with its orientation toward “pure speed,” which seeks to reduce everything to “flows” of information and commodities.<sup>7</sup> The liquidity inherent in network time extends not only to data and material products but to people as well. Characteristics of “flexibility” and “mobility” stand as key attributes for the late modern worker, who must move at the same speed of globalized flows.<sup>8</sup> The advent of ICTs grew out of this neoliberal time and continues to drive it forward. Computing takes the time of the clock and speeds it up into previously unheard-of new fractions: “The meter of the clock that drove the industrial revolution is now being compressed and accelerated by the infinitely more rapid time-loaded functions of high-speed computerization.”<sup>9</sup> The network time that accompanies the compression of

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Publishers, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> As Marx and Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, capital must “nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere” at ever greater speeds, to the point where “all that is solid melts into air.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Jeffrey C. Isaac (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2012), 77.

<sup>7</sup> Hassan, *Empires of Speed*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> See Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: Norton, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Hassan and Ronald E. Purser, “Introduction,” in *24/7: Time and Temporality in the*

time and space increasingly takes the form of virtuality, where fast minds win out over cumbersome bodies. As Nicholas Negroponte notes, the information-based digital age “is about the global movement of weightless bits at the speed of light.”<sup>10</sup>

Hassan argues that lying behind the rise of ICTs is a market-based logic of efficiency and pragmatism. Rather than argue for a hard technological determinism, Hassan understands computers as encoded and designed with a particular politics. ICTs are “entimed” with a particular type of temporality, one that serves the interest of global capital:

Networks are expressed now in a different kind of logic: a *pragmatic logic*.... [C]omputers and computer development is encoded with a pragmatism that derives from the market-based politics of neoliberalism, the principal force behind ICT development since the 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

This combination of neoliberalism and computer development creates societies of “ubiquitous computing,” and entimes not only technologies but also social processes and personal forms of identity in its logic of speed.

### *Machine Clocks and Body Clocks*

For Hassan, the great loss of living in “network time” is forgetting that other times than that of the computer exist.

[W]e adapt to new forms of compressed space-time, and adapt our lives in order to synchronize with its machine-time rhythms, thereby displacing or sublimating or forgetting or having no opportunity to discover, what time actually is and where it actually resides: in us.<sup>12</sup>

Social theorist Barbara Adam views the commodification of time as emanating from the abstraction of time into a measurable quantity that arose with the rise of “machine time” or “clock time.” As opposed to seeing

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*Network Society*, ed. Robert Hassan and Ronald E. Purser (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Hassan, *The Age of Distraction*, 76.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

“clock time” as merely one form of time-telling, western societies have made the measurable time of the clock into time *per se*.<sup>13</sup> With this shift has come a conception of time as a scarce resource, continuously “running out” and thus demanding control and management. Adam contrasts clock time with the time of the body. Human bodies are a kind of clock in that they have a certain rhythm and keep a certain time—but it is not the same as clock time, which is measurable, regular, and moves in a straight line. Body clocks vary in speed and intensity, and are highly context-dependent. The difference is between “*being* time [the body] and *symbolising* it [the clock].”<sup>14</sup> In modernity, time conceived as the clock was designed with Newtonian mechanics and a measurable, abstract conception of time in mind. However, “[w]e live Newtonian and thermodynamic theory but we are biological clocks and organic beings.”<sup>15</sup> When the body cannot adapt or keep up with the speed and logic of clock and network time, it develops pathologies and sicknesses.<sup>16</sup>

While Rosa, Hassan, and Adam never articulate the character of the bodies susceptible to the pathologies resulting from late modern time, they seem to assume fully functioning and non-impaired ones. Yet if the nondisabled body risks a loss of humanity in the time-pressure of a neoliberal logic, how much more might this apply to bodies labelled as “disabled”? For people not infinitely flexible or able to multitask at sufficient rates, life in high-speed society may appear not merely stressful but downright dangerous. The requirement to “keep up to speed” for bodies having limited control of motor function or using wheelchairs can be experienced as a quixotic task, with the nondisabled often understanding this form of embodiment as deeply defective. This stigma can particularly affect people labelled as intellectually disabled. For the pragmatic logic of acceleration, many of these folk represent everything regrettable in a human being: slowness, unproductiveness, immobility, silence, lack of intelligence, and dependency. Their bodies refuse to be “transcended” for the virtuality surfing within a world of instantaneity and disembodied selves. While the challenges that the cognitively impaired

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<sup>13</sup> Barbara Adam, *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 52.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Adam, *Time and Social Theory* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), 75.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>16</sup> See Adam, *Timewatch*, 53. Rosa also understands depression as the illness that most fits an accelerated, late modern society. See Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 248-50.

face may appear anomalous or “special,” *all bodies* experience the alienation and pathologies that can emanate from the processes of social acceleration.

For those considered intellectually disabled, as for all who consider themselves nondisabled, might there be another “time” that can recognize them as persons with gifts to share? Does time in high-speed society cohere with a time understood as redeemed by Jesus Christ? If not, into what practices and social imaginaries must Christians be formed, so that they can live and tell time truthfully? In the light of these questions, I will now briefly explore the sacramental time of footwashing as a temporality that is potentially more hospitable and faithful than the time of high-speed society.

### **Footwashing and Christian Time**

Certain streams within Christianity have historically performed the rite of footwashing and kept this ancient tradition alive in the post-Reformation period. While various traditions practice the rite, its depth and use in Anabaptist-Mennonite communities has been unique. While in some traditions the use of footwashing is perfunctory, a “liturgical drama” meant more to be observed than participated in, the Anabaptist-Mennonite and free church tradition of making footwashing a communal ordinance means that *everyone* participates—and shares in the grace and formation involved.

The hermeneutical “majority report” on footwashing, especially in recent Anabaptist-Mennonite theologizing, presents the rite as one of humble service.<sup>17</sup> In this interpretive framework, Christians are invited to follow Jesus as he humbles himself and serves others rather than exercising authority over them. Other interpretations stress forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with others in the body of Christ. Yet, as Keith Graber-

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<sup>17</sup> For examples, see Graber-Miller, “Mennonite Footwashing,” 148-70; Tripp York, “Dirty Basins, Dirty Disciples, and Beautiful Crosses,” *Liturgy* 20, no. 1 (2005): 11-18; Mark Thiessen Nation, “Washing Feet: Preparation for Service,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 441-51. Works on the historical interpretations of footwashing are few and far between. See G. A. Frank Knight, “Feet Washing,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 5, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912), 814-23; Peter Jeffrey, *A New Commandment: Toward a Renewed Rite for the Washing of Feet* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992); Katherine Gabler Henn, “Emancipatory Inversion and Ecclesial Identity: Text, Context and Ritual Interpretations of Johannine Footwashing,” Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 2006.

Miller notes, the servant theme has predominated in North American congregations as the Mennonite church has become more activist and less sectarian in its relationship with the wider society.<sup>18</sup> This has consequences not only for how people interpret footwashing but also for how Christians perceive and experience time.

### *Liturgy and Time*

I now want to consider footwashing as a mode of liturgical action, and I will try to explicate the kind of time involved in this action. This involves framing it as a rite that brings the whole body unambiguously within a sacramental temporality, offering a pattern for living Christianly in late modern high-speed societies. New ways of understanding, interpreting, and living footwashing open up as authentic modes of discipleship and alternatives to cultures that prize an accelerated and pragmatically entimed temporality.

As a people born out of divine events both of the past and yet to come, Christians understand their faith as essentially “timeful.” Liturgical theologian Emma O’Donnell, for instance, argues that time is crucial for Christian faith because it involves both memory and hope.<sup>19</sup> Christians found their belief on the memory of Jesus’ work accomplished in his earthly ministry, on the cross, and with his resurrection. Additionally, they understand faith to be infused with the hope of Jesus’ second coming and the instantiated fullness of the Kingdom of God. In this way, Christian time is both “anamnetic”—grounded in and sourced from the memory of Jesus, which makes the past present—and eschatological, which draws the present into the redeemed glory of God’s future. For O’Donnell, the memory and hope at the heart of Christian faith represent more than abstract states of subjective awareness. On the contrary, they are “inherently performative” and thus they “do things.”<sup>20</sup> The performance of memory and the hope in the work of the Trinity draws Christians “into a relationship with the past and the future, and even more, into an experiential *participation* in these temporal elements.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Graber-Miller, “Mennonite Footwashing.”

<sup>19</sup> Emma O’Donnell, *Remembering the Future: The Experience of Time in Jewish and Christian Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 129.

<sup>20</sup> O’Donnell here draws on J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962).

<sup>21</sup> O’Donnell, *Remembering the Future*, 174.



A primary place where this faith happens is in worship. O'Donnell sees worship as "the liturgical performance of time" where the past and future are brought into dialogue with the present.<sup>22</sup> When Christians gather to remember Jesus and hope for the Holy Spirit's presence, they let themselves become formed in a new way of telling and living time. In worship they experience time as "saved," i.e., redeemed by Jesus and incorporated into the temporality of the Trinity. As the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann writes,

"It is time [καίρος] to begin the service to the Lord," the deacon announces to the celebrant. This is not simply a reminder that it is now "opportune" or "convenient" for the performance of the sacrament. It is an affirmation and confession that the *new time*, the time of the kingdom of God and its fulfillment in the Church, now enters into the fallen time of "this world" in order that we, the Church, might be lifted up to heaven, and the Church transfigured into "that which she is" – the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup>

The liturgy acts as a kind of *ordo* or pattern of reality that orients lives to God's time. Liturgical performance assists participants in becoming transformed into "the new time," thereby entiming them further into the shape of the Trinity's story.

In the performative actions of the liturgy the present time of the celebrating community (today), the past (salvation history), and the fulfillment of salvation (the future) coalesce. But in the liturgy these temporal modi are not a series of chronological sections; they are the expression of human-temporal existence in the face of the eternity of God. In the temporal modi of the liturgy God allows the celebrating community to participate in the divine fullness of being. This sharing is a pneumatic event that is carried out in the symbolic action of liturgy.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. Paul Kachur (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 48.

<sup>24</sup> Albert Gerhards and Benedikt Kranemann, *Introduction to the Study of Liturgy*, trans. Linda

Understanding temporality in this fashion gives Christians a distinctive way of telling and living time. Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar sees Jesus' saving work as qualitatively transforming time without quantitatively changing it. The tension between eternality and temporality in Jesus means that his "double temporal horizon" has transformed time into a time of salvation, where there is no "delay" but "a vision of time in which the expectation continues in the Church while its fulfillment has already been achieved."<sup>25</sup> Through incorporation into the Trinity's narrative, the church learns to take on the shape of this same temporal horizon, living faithfully "between the times." O'Donnell notes how liturgical performance demonstrates and inculcates believers in the "eschatologically transparent" nature of Christian time. Liturgy orients Christians to the true *telos* or "end" of time, making it present to the liturgical assembly.

Eschatologically transparent time, therefore, is a quality of time that has been transformed through liturgy into the unified form of eschatological time. It is this unified sense of time that characterizes the liturgical present and that allows the liturgical community to "remember the future" through liturgical performance of "eschatological memory." For, in liturgical performance, memory and eschatological anticipation link together the disparate fragments of temporality into a unity, creating a unique liturgical present which is eschatologically – and anamnetically – transparent.<sup>26</sup>

In the memory and hope performed in worship, believers bring the many disparate and competing times of the world together into the saving time of God.

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M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 218.

<sup>25</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7, *Theology: The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 171, quoted in O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future*, 131.

<sup>26</sup> O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future*, 152. For more on the "eschatologically transparent" time of liturgy, see Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, trans. Asheleigh E. Moorhouse (Portland, ME: The Faith Press, 1966), 56-57.

*Liturgical Action as “Inoperative Time”*

Liturgical theologian John Allyn Melloh writes of the difference between liturgical time and the time of secular-oriented cultures. Western cultures tend to understand time as an empty resource that must be controlled, managed, and conquered for the sake of fulfilling self-determined human projects. Time becomes merely “a relentless succession of moments,” as distinct from liturgical time—“eternity as the ripening fruit of time.”<sup>27</sup>

Culture views time pragmatically. Time is money. As the national treadmill speeds up, exhaustion and collapse become more prevalent, but time is for productivity. Daily prayer, however, offers non-pragmatic praise and intercession, celebrating time as God’s gift.<sup>28</sup>

Philosopher of religion Joseph Ballan agrees, understanding liturgy as exemplifying religious “inoperative time.” For Ballan, inoperative time refuses to submit to the logic of capitalist production; it is a time that cannot be reduced to utility. Capitalism advocates a kind of turbo-charged *chronos*, where time is money and the greatest sin is to “waste” time. “Against the backdrop of this system,” he writes, “worship is a gratuitous expenditure of time, a loss of a precious resource. The gratuitousness with which human worshipers give their time can be understood as a response to the time they have been graciously given by God.”<sup>29</sup>

As a liturgical performance, footwashing opens up an opportunity to experience and give thanks for God’s gracious gift of time. In contrast to the many late-modern tools and social practices grounded in the pragmatic, sped-up logic of neoliberalism, footwashing is entimed with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In theologian Ghislain Lafont’s words, this is the “time of Jesus Christ,” in which “sonship [is] pure relationship.”<sup>30</sup> For

<sup>27</sup> John Allyn Melloh, “Liturgical Time, Theology of,” in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E. Fink (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 734.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 739.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Ballan, “Liturgy, Inoperativity, and Time,” in *Impossible Time: Past and Future in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Marius Timmann Mjaaland, Ulrik Houllind Rasmussen, and Philipp Stoellger (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 227.

<sup>30</sup> Ghislain Lafont, *God, Time, and Being* (Petersham, MA: Saint Bede’s Publications, 1992), 167.

Christians, the paschal mystery is the “founding time” that “renders testimony to the economy of time” as an ever-deepening communion between God and humanity.<sup>31</sup> That this founding time includes both Jesus’ passion and his life and ministry is exemplified in his performance of footwashing. Not only does the rite invite Christian participation in Jesus’ humbling death and promise of resurrection, it also invites believers to receive the grace to walk as disciples and to live the communion with others in the body characteristic of the Body of Christ. While service remains an aspect of footwashing, themes of communion and relationship endow the practice with a receptive dimension.

Crucial to entering into this “time of Jesus Christ” through footwashing is the human body. As in all the ordinances and sacramental practices of Christian worship, material reality participates in the communication of God’s grace to believers. Liturgical practices such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper not only validate the earthly but also make it an essential part of God’s real presence to the Body. This kind of communication exists in a particular way with footwashing. Here the body not only refuses to be ignored, but, as Brethren theologian Anna Lisa Gross points out, “To confront another’s body in this stark way and to reveal one’s body to others could be an opportunity to reclaim the goodness of the body.”<sup>32</sup> No “virtual” presence exists in footwashing, or a need to forget the body in order to receive and participate in divine communion. This kind of presence has special relevance for people considered to be disabled, many of whom live in a particular way with bodies often thought of as defective or pathological. Footwashing does not require that their bodies “keep up” with the speed of neoliberal logic, but that they slowly and patiently receive God’s gift of presence and time. The deceleration inherent in the rite reminds others that “the time of Jesus Christ” cannot be controlled or managed, but rather must be entered into and acceded to.

The inoperativity involved in footwashing opens up space for the body to communicate, and thus has the potential of being hospitable towards people with cognitive impairments. Gross mentions how ritual practice

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Lisa Gross, “Body Theology in the Love Feast,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 55, no. 3-4 (2010): 61.

speaks when words cannot. “It honors the body to say that actions can speak for themselves without the rational mind controlling the discourse, tone, or mood.”<sup>33</sup> As opposed to an abstracted measured time, the liturgical time lived in footwashing allows for non-rational communication to form others in authentic discipleship. While an aspect of this formation can be seen as didactic, through liturgical repetition footwashing also works through grace to form Christians *habitually* in “the time of Jesus Christ.” Mennonite sociologist Bob Brenneman describes footwashing as a practice of “embodied forgiveness” that trains believers in a particular story and politics. He describes footwashing as

a powerful rite – an embodied confession that incorporates embodied, vulnerable interaction and facilitates reconciliation even while it provides a script and rehearsal for politics within the Christian body... It is an embodied politics that runs entirely against the grain of power and earned status in the wider society.<sup>34</sup>

Practicing footwashing shows how grace works through transforming both the intellect and the body, entiming disciples with the non-productive and inoperative time of the Kingdom.

### **L’Arche and Footwashing**

One network of communities that might offer a new, yet traditional, way of practicing footwashing as a formative rite is L’Arche, a movement born in France in the 1960s. This international federation of local communities, where people with cognitive impairments and nondisabled assistants share life and faith together, provides the church with a parable of what it could mean to live in God’s time. While never claiming to be perfect exemplars of discipleship, L’Arche communities who practice footwashing can testify to how the rite leads people into the inoperative and eschatologically transparent time of Jesus Christ.

Many persons involved in L’Arche originally understood the Eucharist as the primary sacramental practice uniting persons and

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>34</sup> Brenneman, “Embodied Forgiveness,” 28.

sustaining communities. However, persistent debates about denominational intercommunion, particularly in the UK, made communities seek for other liturgical rites in their worship. At first homes and then whole communities in the UK began to practice footwashing as an element of worship. Participants discovered that it not only provided an opportunity to pray in common but spoke profoundly to living and continuing life together as people, labeled as disabled or nondisabled. Footwashing has now become a practice stretching across the global federation of L'Arche, even in non-Christian settings in India and parts of Africa.

The embodied nature of the rite became readily apparent and relevant for many living in L'Arche communities. In the midst of communal life, bodies are pervasive in everything that happens daily: washing, eating, meetings, work, prayer, and so on. Both for disabled persons stigmatized by nonnormative bodies and for nondisabled persons formed to forget the body in the virtuality of high-speed time, L'Arche founder Jean Vanier discovered that footwashing revealed the body as the place where God comes to dwell and communicate: "The way Jesus touched his disciples must have made them understand, even if only later, the sacredness of their own bodies. The body is the place where the Father dwells."<sup>35</sup> Being guided by liturgical time means that persons decelerate enough to recognize their bodies as sites of communion with God and others.

This discovery is exemplified by the exclamation at a footwashing service made by a Ukrainian core member named Myrou. Witness Bernard Figarol, a nondisabled assistant, writes of how "Myrou, who had so obviously undervalued himself, exclaimed, '*Look at my beautiful feet. Haven't I got beautiful feet?*' This acceptance of himself was like an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. God saying to each one of us: '*You are beautiful and I love you just the way you are.*'"<sup>36</sup> Through the ritual practice of footwashing, people discover a love and friendship communicated through non-verbal and non-rational means. Myrou illustrates how the inoperativity and non-pragmatic dimension of God's communication in footwashing might assist everyone in recognizing their bodies and entire lives as gifts grafted onto the Trinity's

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<sup>35</sup> Jean Vanier, *The Scandal of Service: Jesus Washes our Feet* (Toronto: Novalis, 1998), 36.

<sup>36</sup> Bernard Figarol, "Treading in Holy Ground: L'Arche '96," *Letters of L'Arche*, no. 90 (Dec. 1996): 14.

sacred narrative.

Receiving the gift of Jesus's friendship in footwashing further forms L'Arche members in a pattern of life consistent with "the time of Jesus Christ." While multitasking may represent the virtue most prized in high-speed society, Vanier and others in L'Arche speak of tenderness or gentleness as a gift most amenable to helping persons grow toward their end, namely being in communion with God and others. The time and deliberateness inherent in liturgical performance trains persons in L'Arche in a nonviolent way of encountering other bodies and the natural world.

If the body is truly the dwelling-place of God, a holy ground, then all our relationships are transformed. When we meet and touch others, we do so with even more respect as we realize their life is holy. When Jesus washes his disciples' feet and asks us to do the same, is he not showing us the importance of meeting each other, touching each other, with simplicity, gentleness and great respect, because each person is precious?<sup>37</sup>

L'Arche members see footwashing as requiring a non-utilitarian kind of time, because the rite must happen with the slowness and thoroughness that characterizes tenderness. The transformative possibilities of performing footwashing in this kind of time hold not just for those considered intellectually disabled but for the nondisabled as well. As Jacob, a L'Arche assistant, says of a core member washing his feet, "My feet were washed gently and tenderly. . . . It is a strong memory like a blessing and marked something for me in my own faith. . . . Time stood still . . . it is close to me."<sup>38</sup>

Jacob's experience of time standing still suggests how footwashing could assist people in entering into "the time of Jesus Christ" that defies neoliberal high-speed time. Vanier often speaks of needing to learn how to "befriend time" as an aspect of discipleship. Becoming followers of Jesus requires living a human time, one that decelerates enough to understand faith as a pilgrimage rather than a race. Thus, in addition to tenderness, Vanier regards patience as a crucial virtue in living and telling time rightly:

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<sup>37</sup> Vanier, *The Scandal of Service*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Catherine Anderson and Sandra Carroll, "The Footwashing in John 13:1-20, in the Context of L'Arche," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 20, no. 3 (2013): 192.

“Perhaps the essential quality for anyone who lives in community is patience: a recognition that we, others, and the whole community take time to grow. Nothing is achieved in a day. If we are to live in community, we have to be friends of time.”<sup>39</sup> As a rite performed in the inoperativity of the Trinity’s time, footwashing opens a way for people to discover the Gospel priorities of relationship over commodity and bodily presence over virtuality. Being and becoming friends of time through footwashing thus has the potential not only to inoculate Christians from high-speed society but also to witness to another Lord and another time.

### **Conclusion**

I have attempted to portray footwashing as a rite performed in the inoperativity of the Trinity’s time that opens a way for people to discover the Gospel priorities of relationship over speed and bodily presence over virtuality. Rather than a defunct practice better relegated to a bygone era, footwashing instead exists as a practice given by Jesus to the church as a means of divine communication and communal formation. The speed entimed within global capitalism and ICTs can form late-modern persons into alienated and fragmented individuals. This conception of telling time is especially dangerous for those labelled as intellectually disabled, as they represent everything antithetical to the “network man” prized in high-speed societies. By contrast, footwashing as a form of liturgical action brings Christians within the “eschatologically transparent” and saving time of Jesus Christ, and relativizes the seeming dominance of clock or network time. As I have sought to show with the example of footwashing in L’Arche communities, this mode of time is potentially more hospitable not only for those labelled as intellectually disabled but for everyone in late modernity. People like Myrou and others with cognitive impairments might even lead the nondisabled in being and becoming “friends of time” who witness to another way of being and telling time.

The recent decline in the practice of footwashing by Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations not only evades Jesus’ command to celebrate the rite, it also prevents the church from being formed in, and witnessing, to a nonviolent temporality. By becoming “entimed” with “the time of Jesus

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<sup>39</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 134.



Christ,” Christians answer a fundamental political question, namely: Whose time do we follow and order life by? Living amidst an accelerated, globalized world can make people lose sight of different patterns of life and modes of being. As a sacramental practice, footwashing is an ecclesial activity that could form disciples into the gentle, relational time of Jesus Christ, one decelerated enough to love the enemy and welcome the stranger. In a world desperate for signs of peace and examples of hospitality, the renewal of an Anabaptist-Mennonite performance of footwashing could offer the church—and the world—a practice that is both faithful and inspiring.

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