



Research article

JESUS'S NEW COMMANDMENT IN JOHN 13:34-35: "LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR MORE THAN YOURSELF" IN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Using historical critical exegesis, this paper argues that Jn 13:34-35 commands a radical love that requires Christians to love their neighbours more than themselves. The aim of the paper is twofold. First, the paper demonstrates that there is a consistent ethical teaching of radical love in John's Gospel and second, it shows that the ethics of John's Gospel is not inward looking as some have claimed. If Christians love others as themselves, they fulfil a demand of the Mosaic Law. Jesus reinterpreted the Law in Jn 13:34 and commanded a higher standard of love for his followers. Therefore, Christian mission demands the Jesus standard—loving others more than yourself. Jesus's example and teaching serve as the gift and the demand.



1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it shows that there a consistent ethical teaching on radical love in John's Gospel. Second, it rejects the claim that the love command of John's Gospel is sectarian and inward looking. In John's Gospel as elsewhere, Jesus taught his disciples to love one another. Hitherto it has been taken for granted that Jesus's teaching on love is based entirely on the standard of the Mosaic Law. This is inadequate. Jesus's standard of love in John's Gospel is higher than the standard prescribed by the Mosaic Law because Jesus loved people more than himself by dying for them.

The absence of a robust, sustained systematic teaching of ethics in the gospel does not mean it does not teach ethics. The ethics of John's Gospel is implied and implicit. This is demonstrated especially by the gospel's teaching on love. In John's Gospel, Jesus teaches his followers to love others more than themselves.

In Jn 13:34, Jesus gives a new commandment of love to his disciples. The new commandment is a reworking and reconfiguration of the Mosaic Law commandment of love for the new covenant era. Jesus was familiar with the Mosaic Law command, which he commented on in the Synoptic Gospels in response Jewish people still under Judaism of the first century. In John's Gospel however, Jesus reinterprets, reconfigures and reworks the well-known love commandment to suit the demands of the new in-breaking kingdom of God, which he inaugurates. What is specifically "new" in the new commandment is the variation of the standard of love. Jesus's self-giving love, ultimately expressed in his death on the cross, is the new standard of love for everyone who would follow Jesus. This is a community-building love that has missionary implications because it not only proves that those who practice it are Jesus's disciples; it also challenges those outside the Christian community to build their own communities on this love model. The new commandment calls on Christians everywhere in the world to love their neighbours more than themselves. It therefore precludes any labelling of other people as "enemies" who "deserve" to be cursed "in the name of Jesus." It is a unifying love, missionary love.



2. The Structure of John's Gospel

The Gospel according to John is a unique Gospel. It has many features that make it distinct from the gospels of the synoptic tradition. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus does not use parables to teach people in the Gospel of John. Instead, one finds long discourses, often a chapter wide, in which Jesus engages and educates ignorant people regarding some spiritual truths that are relevant to the lives of those with whom he speaks. The best examples are found in John 3 (the Nicodemus story) and John 4 (the story of the Samaritan woman). Besides, there are major sections of the gospel, where Jesus embarks upon public and private ministry. The ministry of Jesus from chs. 2 to 12 covers his public ministry mainly in Judea and Jerusalem with occasional withdrawals to Galilee. The private ministry of Jesus to his disciples is mainly from John 13 to 16, just before his high priestly prayer in ch. 17 and then his arrest in ch. 18. The events that follow describe the arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus's farewell conversation with his disciples begins in ch. 13. This marks the beginning of the Lord's private ministry to his disciples. The new commandment to love others more than oneself is given in ch. 13.

3. The Commandment to Love one another

John 13:34-35 (34 *ἐντολὴν καινὴν δίδωμι ὑμῖν, ἵνα ἀγαπᾶτε ἀλλήλους, καθὼς ἠγάπησα ὑμᾶς ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀγαπᾶτε ἀλλήλους* 35 *ἐν τούτῳ γνώσονται πάντες ὅτι ἐμοὶ μαθηταὶ ἐστε, ἐὰν ἀγάπην ἔχητε ἐν ἀλλήλοις*) falls within the private ministry of Jesus to his disciples. It is part of the long farewell discourse that Jesus had with his disciples in John's Gospel. It opens with an evening meal in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, discloses who among them is going to betray him and predicts his death. In addition to the exemplification of service and the probable institution of the Holy Communion, Jesus also gives the disciples a new commandment.

The nature of this private ministry is in the form of a prominent person about to die, who gives out teaching, guidance and instructions to those who he deeply loves, who would remain in the world after he is gone. In many parts of Africa, it is believed that a person who is about to die has access to the world of the spirits (ancestors) and is therefore able to share information from that realm with those who are living in the present world. The usefulness of such a message can hardly be underestimated. Jesus's farewell discourse is an attempt to help



the disciples to prepare for and overcome the challenges that the world would present to them when their master is gone. Jesus gives his disciples *ἐντολὴν καινὴν* (a new commandment) on Maundy Thursday.

4. Intertextual connects of the Love command: Jewish response to a Jewish enquiry

This love commandment of John's Gospel is akin to what is reported in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In this sense it is hardly new. It is a well-known Mosaic injunction. In another sense however, John's account is radically different in its implication because it goes a step further. In Luke, Jesus's comment on love as the greatest commandment is found in 10:27 but the unit also embodies vv. 25 and 26. Luke's account of Jesus's reference to the greatest commandment forms the introductory part to the parable of the Merciful Samaritan. In Luke, the conversation began when an expert of the Law wanted to know from Jesus what to do to inherit eternal life. The Law expert was however, not an honest inquirer. Nevertheless, Jesus pointed the Law expert to the Law. The expert rightly quoted and combined Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18 in response to Jesus's question about what the Law says. Jesus affirmed the response and encouraged the Law expert to go and observe this love commandment in order to inherit eternal life. It was the expert's further question about who is a neighbour that occasioned the well-known parable of the Merciful Samaritan. This is apparently an interaction between two Jewish theologians about the Jewish Law. The response was equally consistent with Jewish Law and theology.

In Matthew, a Pharisee, an expert in the Law, wanting to test Jesus, asked about the greatest commandment in the Jewish Law (Matt 22:35; cf Mk 12:28-31). Responding, Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul and mind. Mark's account places on Jesus's lips the direct recall of the *Shema* (see Deut. 6:5). Thus, Mark added that Jesus said a person is required to love God with all their heart (*καρδίας*), soul (*ψυχῆς*) and mind¹ (*διανοίας*) (Mk 12:30). The second is to love one's neighbour as oneself (Matt 22: 37-39). Here Mark and Matthew preserve the same words and those words recall Lev 19:18. The significance of this is that both in Matthew and Mark, Jesus answered the question as a Jewish theologian. This is clear from Matt 22:40, where Jesus indicates that the Law and the Prophets (the Hebrew Bible) hangs on these two commandments.

¹ It also valid to render *διανοίας* as "understanding".



5. John's Complementation in John 13:34

John's Gospel reports a vital complementation to Jesus's synoptic response for Christian learning (Jn 13:34). In John's Gospel, it is Jesus who takes the initiative to teach his disciples many things towards the end of his life. He was preparing them not merely to worship God as Jews as they had done previously, but to profess him as the Christ, who inaugurates the new kingdom of God, and thereby creates a new community of God's people. Coming after the exemplification of humility in the foot washing episode, the injunction "love one another as I have loved you", "ties the love command to the person of Jesus, and the memory of his ministry" (Brown and Skinner 2017, 69). The person of Jesus creates a new community where members are required to love one another just as Jesus has loved them, that is, more than themselves. To this extent, the new love commandment with its new standard of love, contrasted with what the Mosaic Law prescribes, functions also as an identity marker for members of the new community of Jesus followers.

For Leon Morris, Jesus is here speaking to the new community of believers (Morris 1995, 562) by introducing a new standard of love. "Love your neighbour as I have loved you", implies that how Jesus loved the disciples was to be the standard by which the disciples would love themselves and indeed others. This crucial dimension determines the standard by which Jesus expects his follows (Christians of today) to love one another. Jesus's new love commandment is consistent with but not derived entirely from the Law; it comes from a divine teacher who embodies the Word of God (Koester 2008, 89). His love command has been reconfigured to become something new (Koester 2008, 194). It is a further manifestation of the love of God that resulted in God giving Jesus to the world so that everyone who believes in Jesus receives eternal life (Jn 3:16).

Koester recognises that two things distinguish the new love commandment from the old. First, unlike the old commandment whose standard of love is the Law, the standard of love for the new commandment is the love that Jesus has given to people. Second, unlike the old commandment which requires people to love others as themselves, the new commandment requires that people love one another as Jesus loves them (Koester 2008, 194). The new commandment calls for mutual love. This vision of mutual love makes the new command a community-building commandment. "As people give and receive love from one another, a



community is formed.” (Koester 2008, 194). Giving and receiving love in the newly-formed community enables members to continue on the path of mission and discipleship.

The meaning of Jn 13:34 (cf. 15:12), derives right from Jn 13:1 where a new section opens with Jesus’s farewell message and instructions to the disciples (Brown & Skinner 2017, 8). “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13–15), Jesus would later point out. Jesus uses the strategy of repetition to reinforce two critical aspects of his love command, reciprocity and imitation (Jo-Ann A. Brant 2011, 212). The disciples are to imitate divine love as Jesus exemplifies both in his interaction with the disciples and his self-giving love that was shortly to follow. Furthermore, the disciples’ love for one another, modelled after the pattern of the divine love was to be reciprocal. This has been described as an “ethics of response” (One-sided love would be inadequate to fulfil the divine imperative to love, to make disciples glorify Jesus and testify to the love of God).

It is such reciprocal love among the disciples that would enable them to convince the world about their commission from Christ to do mission and make disciples. John focuses on faith in Jesus, mutual love and unity as ingredients necessary for the success of the church’s mission to the world (Köstenberger 2013, 28, 30). The command for the disciples to love one another as Jesus has loved them was already evident in the foot washing drama and the associated teaching (Köstenberger 2013:136). Since the Father, Jesus and the Spirit indwell the disciples, the unity and love the disciples are to model will be in keeping with the unity and love evident in the Godhead (Köstenberger 2013:144). The new commandment of love which Jesus issues in Jn 13:34 (cf. 15:12) is his own (Baron, 2015:285) and it has far-reaching implications for John’s view of the Mosaic Law (Baron, 2015, v). It is a reinterpretation of the *Shema* and the Mosaic Law for the eschatological age (Baron, 2015:7). Just as Jesus fulfils the Law in Matthew by reinterpreting it, so he fulfils the OT love commandment by revising the standard of love to be his own model of love for the disciples.

It can be seen that the

Evangelist’s use of the singular ἐντολή is evidence that he and his readers believe that they no longer live under the Mosaic νόμος, but under a new, singular commandment, and therefore, under a new covenant. At the core of this commandment is Christological interpretation of the *Shema*: it is through obedience to Jesus’s ἐντολή



that the *Shema*, the chief commandment of the Old Testament, is now lived out among Jesus's disciples in the new, eschatological age. (Baron, 2015:387-388).

The use of, "This is *my* commandment" (αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἐντολὴ ἡ ἐμὴ; John 15:12; emphasis added (Baron 2015, 396) carries a strong note of possession. The new commandment is ἡ ἐντολὴ ἡ ἐμὴ (my commandment), Jesus says. The new commandment signifies both continuity with and radical break from Judaism (Baron, 2015:399) because of this note of possession. It is founded on the previous command to love God thoroughly and to love one's neighbour as oneself. Jesus's revision of the commandment does not change the demand to love God with one's heart, soul and mind but it changes the standard of love for his followers in the horizontal sense. "Jesus' new *mitzvah* signifies the terms of the new covenant: believe in Jesus and love one another (13:34; 1 John 3:23). The *Shema*, the singular commandment of the Mosaic Law, has been renewed and transformed [c]hristologically in the singular commandment of Jesus." (Baron, 2015:406). Moreover, it comes with a new standard of love as well—The Jesus standard. This amounts to the introduction of a radically new Jesus ethic in John's Gospel.

5.1. *The love ethic of John's Gospel*

Some scholars deny that there is consistent ethical teaching in John's Gospel.² It is further alleged that the ethics of John's Gospel, if it exists at all, is cultic, inward-looking and indifferent to the suffering of the troubled. "John understands himself... to belong to a group of people in the light over against the human race in darkness" (Rainbow 2014, 440), but the allegations go as far as to suggest that if there is anything as the ethics of John's Gospel at all, its primary preoccupation is belief in Jesus leading to the benefit of eternal life and the community members' own love for one another. "It is further claimed that fundamentalist groups can rely on John's [G]ospel to propagate their selfish (un)ethical behaviour in the name of being "biblical". But fundamentalist and illegitimate readings of the [G]ospel of John cannot be substituted for the [G]ospel itself." (Brown and Skinner 2017, xxiv). For

² See Wayne A. Meeks, "The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist," in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 317ff; Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 99-100; Ernst Kasemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (London: SCM, 1968), 59.



those who see John's ethics as sectarian and ethnic in character, Rainbow's comments prove succinct. "To postmodern readers who regard any human perspective as inescapably limited and relative, and all truth claims as being on equal ground, John's absolute clarity with no shades... can come across as dogmatic, simple, exclusive, intolerant, cranky, arrogant, bigoted, repulsive." (Rainbow 2014, 404). It can be emphasised that the disciples' outward show of love to one another potentially has universal implications because it will prove their membership of the Jesus community and challenge the lower love ethic of the outside, unbelieving world (Jon 13:35). This makes it missionary love.

When the Gospel of John is read as "Narrative Christology" (Brown and Skinner 2017, 27) it can be demonstrated that the love commandment is universal and normative. The foot washing episode serves as an example of loving service to the disciples but it also points forward to the crucifixion as the ultimate of self-sacrificing service (Brown and Skinner 2017, 33). This amounts to "sacrificial self-giving" (Brown and Skinner 2017, 33). As Paul Rainbow has noted, "Given that one purpose of the intracommunal love command is to draw the world to know God, this kind of love is anything but sectarian (John 13:35; 17:21, 23)." (Rainbow 2014, 379).

By issuing a new commandment, Jesus makes the love he gives to others (through foot washing and death on the cross) the model of divine love. As Koester notes, if taken out of its context, the new love commandment could become a basis for inward-looking relationships by like-minded people. But if the context is kept in mind, it will be recalled that the love which the new commandment commends, assumes that one's enemies may be members of one's community because the love command is a commentary on the foot washing scenario. This is implied from the recall that Judas, the betrayer, was a member of the community. (Koester, 2008:195). Love within this community is both exemplary and countercultural to those outside it since it proves that the members are the disciples of Jesus (Jn 13:35). This community-building mutual love demonstrates that there is a better alternative to the structure of society based on divine love which is a possibility.

Jesus demonstrated that his death carried not only salvific but also ethical significance which radically transforms the contemporary hierarchical social structure into a new model of mutual service unto death (Chin 2019, 136). Undoubtedly, the new commandment of love distinguishes the people of Jesus from the rest of the world (Harris 2012, 253). If therefore,



those who claim to belong to Jesus exhibit conduct that reflects the morality and ethics of the dark, outside world, they succeed in denouncing their own identity as members of the Jesus community. Theirs is to constitute a vital alternative to the self-seeking love that is prevalent in the dark, non-Jesus, outside community. In other words, Jesus's new love commandment, far from creating a sectarian inward-looking community of disciples who love themselves and hope to benefit from eternal life, poses a strong challenge to those outside the Jesus community to redefine love after the Jesus model. It is a call for the recreation of the non-Jesus society using the Jesus love as yardstick.

5.2. *The nature of Christ's love*

How did Jesus love people? There are three possibilities: Either Jesus loved his disciples less than himself, equal to himself or more than himself. From his deeds and words, some of which we have already mentioned, it is not difficult to tell which of the three standards of love Jesus demonstrated and which he now requires of his disciples. We learn from Jn 3:16 that God loved the world so much that he gave God's only begotten Son to die for the world. John 15:13 teaches that no greater love exists than that a person should lay down their life for their friends. The previous verse categorically supports the point of this paper: My commandment is this: love each other as I have loved you (Jn 15:12). The testimony of I John 4:19, is that we love God because God first loved us.

According to I Jn 3:16, we know what love is because Jesus laid down his life for us. By this, we are required to lay down our lives for one another. Obviously, Jesus loved his disciples more than himself and called upon all his followers to imitate him. Therefore, Jesus's teaching (gospel message) implies that believers in Jesus (Christians for that matter) are to love their neighbour more than themselves. This is the gospel law according to Jesus. To claim that Jesus taught his disciples to love their neighbours "as themselves" as is commonly bandied around, is to misrepresent the new commandment of the Lord. Jesus would not have spoken of *ἐντολὴν καινὴν* (a new commandment), if he simply wanted to point the disciples to an already existing Jewish commandment that they were well aware of. To be sure, Jesus summarised those bits and pieces of the Jewish love law to respond to specific concerns. The synoptic reports indicate those instances in which Jesus responded to Jewish enquirers by laying down his summary of the Jewish love commandment as love for



God and love for neighbour. The vital complement that John supplies to the Jesus ethic of love reported in Jn 13:34, must therefore be taken as Christian (more than Jewish). This is what makes the command “new”.

Craig Blomberg is of the opinion that the new commandment of Jn 13:34 is “new” in the sense that in Christ the disciples would be empowered to obey it (Blomberg 2009, 440). This is not convincing. The Synoptic Gospels also attribute the love commandment to Jesus or at least report Jesus’s comments on the OT love commandment. While Jesus does not label the love command as “new” in the synoptic tradition, he points to the command in response to questions put before him about the greatest commandment (Luke’s context is slightly different as we have seen). In each of those cases, however, Jesus does require those inquirers to obey the commandment without offering or promising them additional help (empowerment) to obey it. In the synoptic tradition, the standard of love is the Mosaic Law requirement because Jesus was dealing with matters in Judaism of the first century. It is only in John that Jesus changes the standard of love to his own model of love. It is probably in this sense that the commandment in John’s Gospel is “new”.

6. The New Commandment: Love your neighbour more than yourself

Jesus died for people because he loves them more than himself. Jesus continues to love his disciples while they still sin against him and fail to love him as they ought. If he only loved them as himself or worse still, if he loved them less than himself, he would have given up on them in no time. Judging from Jesus’s teaching in Matthew’s Gospel that he has come not to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfil them (Matt. 5:17), and considering that Jesus comes across as the consummate interpreter of the Law, we can understand why the complementary newness of the commandment that he gives in John’s Gospel is significant. It validates his authority as the ultimate interpreter of God’s Law.

“The newness of the commandment cannot be traced to the command to show love for others, for the command to love others is rooted in the OT. What makes the command new is that Jesus’ self-giving love for his disciples, which manifested in his giving up his life for his sheep, becomes the paradigm for love (John 10:11, 15; 15:13).” (Schreiner 2008, 642). Genuine love is sacrificial because it consists of giving up one’s life for others (Schreiner 2008, 643). This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we



ought to lay down our lives for one another (1 John. 3:16, NRSV). John Ashton claims that the new commandment to love one another in Jn 13:34, like Jn 15:12 is an addition by a redactor and places no requirement beyond the general faith demand on the disciples that permeates the whole Gospel (Ashton 2007:432-433). If this were so, we would be forced to treat the entire teaching of Jesus in John chs. 13-16 as optional because those chs. are inextricably linked.

Neglecting to pay attention to the vital complement that Jesus supplies to the commandment of love has led to claims that cannot be legitimately supported with the Bible. Claiming that theories of human flourishing require that one first loves oneself before one is able to love another person as oneself is not supported by the Bible, much less by Jesus's gospel law. Treating others as you would have them treat you, appears to be a general rule that makes logical sense in all human cultures. This so-called golden rule is even attributed to Matt. 7:12. But this is not the last word the NT has on loving other people as Jn 13:34 shows. To claim that, "the Good Book" merely teaches "love others as you wish to be loved", as some do, is problematic. Granting this claim, without assuming it to be true, is there really someone who does not wish others love him or her more than he or she is willing to love others? In any event, love by definition, is to be understood as sacrificing something in order to help someone. That already goes beyond trying to love someone as you love yourself. If you only love your neighbour as yourself, you would not give to your neighbour what you wish to keep for yourself because you love yourself as much as you love the other person. In Matt 5:46, Jesus says, "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" (NRSV). He makes a similar argument against those who greet only their brothers and sisters and notes that even the gentiles do so. He then calls on his disciples to "Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt 5:48, NRSV). These ideas are from Matthew but they are attributed to Jesus making them relevant to the current argument.

Though many people claim Jesus only asked people to love their neighbour as themselves, the fact is that Jesus said more than that. Jesus calls for perfect love modelled after the heavenly Father's love. Jesus asks people to love their neighbour as he has loved them. Since Jesus loved people more than himself, for which reason he died for them, anyone willing to go by the standard Jesus set must admit that Jesus requires them to love their neighbours



more than themselves. No one can claim that this standard of love is easily attainable. This is a lofty standard that is difficult to practise. But it is the Jesus love law. It is the Jesus standard. It is the kingdom gospel. It is the appropriate standard for whoever professes to be a child of God and a believer in Jesus.

The immediate context of the teaching in John's Gospel suggests that Jesus intended this standard to apply among his disciples for we infer from his teaching that "loving your neighbour more than yourself" would make the world know that you are a disciple of Jesus. This adds a missionary dimension to the new gospel law. Part of its purpose is to help evangelise the world. The disciples of Jesus are called into a new relationship with God inaugurated by Jesus at his incarnation. This is a relationship in which God restores all the blessings of pre-fall Eden to enable repentant children of God experience anew, God's forgiveness, renewal and restoration. Everyone so restored has a responsibility to live a God-centred life that puts a neighbour's concerns above their own needs and concerns. If the disciples are able to do this, they would shine as light in the world (cf. Matt 5:14-15). The world would see the light and come to it. This will bring salvation to many and glory to God (cf. Matt 5:16).

6.1. A new way of loving and witnessing

The new commandment impels for Christians a new way of loving and witnessing based on their relationship with the Father through Jesus. "The word ἐντολή ... sums up the Christian doctrine of salvation from its origin in the eternal love of God, manifested in Jesus, to the mutual love of Christians in the church." (Barrett 1978, 377). Indeed, "...the love of the disciples for one another is not merely edifying, it reveals the Father and the Son." (Barrett 1978, 452). Loving one another enables the disciples to give testimony about the nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son. In the foot washing episode and its accompanying teachings, "What Jesus... both "does" for his own and asks of them...[falls]...in the context of God's love for the world in giving up his Son (3:16). As the Father has loved the Son, so the Son loves his own (15:9) so that they may also love one another (13:34; 15:12). The commandment to mutual love is a commandment to "remain" in the love of the one who sends the disciples." (Ridderbos 1997, 466). The Father sent Jesus and Jesus sends the disciples the same way that the Father sent him (Jn 20:21). All of Jesus's



instruction is teaching about his person; in issuing the new commandment of love, Jesus demonstrates also that his actions constitute a command because they reflect the love that binds him to the Father and the Father to him (Baur 2016, 353). By calling the disciples to fraternal love, Jesus was inviting them to model the same divine love that binds the Father to the Son.

Jesus calls upon the disciples to practise a new way of loving one another which is the way of service and witness (Adeyemo 2006, 1283). Jesus exemplifies this new way of loving one another at the beginning of the chapter (Jn 13) by washing the feet of his disciples. He exemplifies it ultimately by dying for them. The radical nature of this indiscriminate, new love was already at play in the foot washing episode. Among the Jews, it was the responsibility of a host to provide foot washing hospitality to guests. It was the duty of slaves to wash the feet of guests and in the absence of slaves the youngest wife of the male host. Jesus was not the host in any clear sense in the foot washing episode. Nor was he the owner of the house in which the meal was held. Jesus was not a slave. Jesus did not fit into the category of any of those whose responsibility it was to wash the feet of guests. Yet Jesus chose to wash the feet of his disciples as an example for the disciples to follow. He probably does not expect the disciples to replicate this in any literal sense but rather to learn the lesson that their Lord himself washes the feet of his pupils as if he is their slave. By so doing, Jesus was showing the disciples the nature of the type of service that would bear witness to the rest of the world. He underscores the power of such witness in Jn 13:34 by mentioning that it constitutes an identity marker for the disciples. Jesus laying down his life becomes the source and norm for discipleship (Koester 2008, 89) and mission.

The new commandment to love invites for the disciples a new identity (as little children) and a new morality but more importantly, the new commandment together with its exemplification of the foot washing dramatise further the incarnation (Brodie 1993, 456). To this must be added the ultimate model of love, the death of Jesus for his friends. The new commandment of mutual love has both vertical and horizontal dimensions because it is modelled after the love within God and lived out among human beings (Brodie 1993, 516).

6.2. *The new commandment and cursing people “in the name of Jesus”*

One of the clearest implications of Jesus’s new love commandment is the challenge to love others more than yourself. Kanagarai comments on this idea as follows:



John reflects this idea when he contrasts hatred and love. He does not plainly say, ‘Do not kill’, but he strongly emphasises the positive dimension of this ethical code through the exhortation to follow a new commandment (έντολή καινή), ‘Love one another’ (13:34; 15:12). One should love the fellow-beings even to the extent of laying down one’s life for them (15:13). The depth of love which the Johannine Jesus demands from his followers makes the murderous act fully impossible to commit. John thus brings out the positive significance of the sixth commandment by expressing it in a more redemptive and positive manner. (Kanagaraj 2001, 52).

Based on this interpretation, it is impossible to justify the common African “Christian” practice of people cursing their “enemies” “in the name of Jesus”. The Jesus in whose name people claim to curse their “enemies” loves and welcomes whoever would come to him. Matthew’s Jesus even urges the disciples to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44, NRSV).

Interpreters debate whether Jesus’s acts in John 13 have sacramental significance or not “but there is no question that both foot washing and the breaking of bread are [his] final personal expression of... love for his... disciples [and a] final opportunity to prepare [them] for the coming trials and mission. What is surprising, however, is that Jesus lets Judas partake in this highly significant event despite knowing who Judas is (6:71; 13:26).” [Chin 2019, 157]. Jesus knew all along that Judas was a betrayer (13:21). The fact that the disciples wondered who the culprit was when Jesus told them one of them would betray him shows that Jesus had not been advertising any animosity or disapproval towards Judas (Chin 2019, 157) in spite of his omniscience. This flies in the face of the negative, common African “Christian” attitude of hating and palpably attacking opponents within or without the church whom they are happy to label as “enemies”. Either such Christians simply do not know what it means to be Christian or they profess a different god.

To love other people, including your “enemies” more than yourself is not pleasant or easy. It is the Holy Spirit (the *paracletos* who dwells in believers) who will enable the disciples to keep the new love commandment. The new standard of love for the new commandment comes with help from the Holy Spirit who is the *paracletos* who replaces the physical presence of Jesus but his help is not what makes the commandment new. For the disciples,



“Jesus will depart (13:33)—but that only makes possible the arrival of the *pneuma*; then they will also become able to live in accordance with Jesus’ new love commandment (13:34-35).” (Engberg-Pedersen 2017, 284). The *paracletos* functions as the continuous presence of Jesus Christ (Hagner 2012, 281), who loved from start to finish, so how can disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit (*paracletos*/Jesus with us) curse people “in the name of Jesus” who loved even his enemies and did not curse anyone?

While the new love commandment was originally given to the twelve, it subsequently applies to all Christ-followers everywhere at all times (Lizorkin-Eyzenberg 2015, 215). One “striking feature of Jesus’ love command in the Johannine tradition is that it emphasises loving one another as an expression of one’s love for Jesus.” (Anderson 2011, 17). The Epistle of I John shows that the new commandment of Jesus later became a community rule as expressed in I John 4:7-8 (Anderson 2011, 17). Whoever cannot love their sisters and brothers whom they see cannot claim to love the unseen God (I John 4:20) [Anderson 2011, 17]. We can see “the unfolding Passion events...as the ultimate expression of Jesus’s love for his [disciples] and his love for the world...” (Anderson 2011, 205). Therefore, while the author of John’s Gospel does not stress believers’ love for the people of the world, the fact that God loved the world so much as to give Jesus to the world is to be an example for those who believe in Jesus (Marshall 2014, 309).

The new commandment equates with the gift of Jesus’s example to the disciples because the foot washing (Jn 13:15) is *ὑποδειγμα γὰρ ἔδωκα ὑμῖν* and the sharing of the morsel is accompanied by the gift of a new commandment. Example and imperative, gift and demand, characterise the new love commandment (Moloney 1998, 385-386). “The new commandment that Jesus gives to his disciples who remain in the evil world is to live in mutual love. This includes the possibility of giving up one’s life for the sake of the others.” (Kobel 2011, 106). Jesus himself exemplifies this in John 18:8 where he declared his identity and requested that his disciples be allowed to go, thereby assuring their safety (Kobel 2011, 106). The new love commandment implies unity in diversity because it requires Jewish, Samaritan and Gentile Christians to work together in one faith (Keener 2003, 923). That the Mosaic Law commands love for one another is well-known. What is new here is the standard of love, “as I have loved you”. “By laying down his life for others, Jesus loved the disciples more than his own life (11:5; 13:1).” (Keener 2003, 924). The new love commandment, then, is an invitation to the



imitation of Jesus's mortal sacrifice. John frames the new love commandment in the context of the passion to show that loving one another as Jesus loves and following Jesus to death, are one and the same thing (Keener 2003, 927). In effect, no one can claim to be a genuine disciple of Jesus who thinks it is right to hate, despise, spite and curse other people as long as it makes him or her feel "safe." Jesus demands something better than that.

7. Conclusion

In John's Gospel, Jesus gives a new love commandment to all believers (Jn 13:24). Believers in Jesus are commanded to love their neighbour more than themselves, modelled after the pattern of Jesus's own love for them. Those who obey this commandment will realise that it demands loving another person even to the point of giving up one's life for them. While this may not be a convenient imperative for most Christians today, it is nevertheless what Jesus demands of them as consistently taught in John's Gospel. This radical new love, contrary to general opinion is not inward looking or sectarian but has implications for mission practice because it constitutes an identity marker for members of the new Jesus community. If the church is willing to obey Jesus, then it must hear and teach this message. If the church accepts this challenge, no section of it, whether in Africa or elsewhere, will henceforth find it convenient to hate and despise other people to the point of claiming to "curse them in the name of Jesus." Such cursing is foreign to the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel and inconsistent with the Christian identity.

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