



Lesson 6: Ordinances of the Church

Baptism and Communion

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Sacrament or Ordinance?

The terms sacrament and ordinance are used to describe both baptism and communion by different traditions in Christianity. A sacrament refers to something that conveys divine grace in and of itself. The word ordinance, on the other hand, stresses that there is nothing in the ceremonies themselves that conveys grace. Baptism and communion are to be followed and obeyed because they were ordained of God (hence *ordinance*). While there is spiritual profit from baptism and communion, this benefit comes from obedience to God, not a special ceremony. Baptists have consistently used the term ordinance for this reason.

Baptism

Christ commanded baptism (Matthew 28:19-20) and we know it was and is crucial to the life of the church (Acts 2:38). Baptism is hotly debated, but God gives us sufficient instruction in Scripture to know how this rite should be carried out.

How Should One Be Baptized: Mode

Should baptism be administered by immersion, pouring, sprinkling, or does it matter? Here are 3 reasons immersion is the right method:

1. The Language reason – the English word baptism transliterates the Greek word “baptisma.” This means that rather than choose an English word that matched the Greek word, English

translators just spelled the Greek word using English letters. The Greek word “baptisma” clearly meant “immersed in a liquid.”¹ For this reason, baptism should be by immersion since that’s what the word “baptism” actually means.

2. The New Testament reason – we have several hints that when baptism took place in Scripture, it was by immersion. John the Baptist baptized at Aenon “because water was plentiful there” (John 3:23). The Ethiopian eunuch and Philip went down into and came up out of the water (Acts 8:36-39), not necessary if Philip was just pouring or sprinkling.
3. The Early Church reason – strong evidence suggests that the normal practice of the earliest church was baptism by immersion.²

What Does It Signify: Meaning

Some, such as Catholics, argue that baptism by itself saves. Others argue that baptism saves as it works with faith. Still others argue that baptism provides some kind of vague help, while struggling to specify what exactly. Scripture teaches, however, that faith alone that saves (Ephesians 2:8-9). Paul’s harshest words were for those who tried to add circumcision to the requirement of faith alone, and those who try to add baptism are making a dangerously close error. The thief on the cross was never baptized, yet went to heaven.

Baptism is a symbol. It demonstrates one’s identification with Christ and is a dramatic picture of one’s death to sin and self, burial, and resurrection to a new life in Christ (Romans 6). While it does not inherently save, it can be a means of expressing one’s faith in God like a sinner’s prayer and thus an indirect means (1 Peter 3:21).

¹ See *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), *An Intermediate Greek English Lexicon* (Liddell and Scott), and the Septuagint which uses the word to describe Namaan dipping seven times in the Jordan river (2 Kings 5:14).

² Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).

Who Gets Baptized: Subjects

Since baptism is a sign of identification with Christ upon belief in his name, only those who have accepted him should be baptized. Those who baptize infants do so, not because of clear biblical command, but because of other theological convictions (since Israel is the church, baptism is the new circumcision). While some households were baptized, there is no mention of children made, and many households are said to rejoice and believe (Acts 16:31, 34; 18:18).

Communion

While baptism is meant to bring people into the church, communion is the rite that maintains those already in. Christ himself instituted it (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:18–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–25) although the meaning of it has been a matter of intense debate. In fact, Luther and Zwingli refused to cooperate in the Reformation because they couldn't agree on the Lord's Supper!

Scripture calls this rite “breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42), “Lord’s table” (1 Corinthians 11:20), and “communion [KJV, ESV “participation]” (1 Corinthians 10:16-22). The main point of the rite is to remember Christ’s death, but as more than just recall. Remember in the biblical sense is “the dynamic recalling of the past so that it again becomes a present reality which is operative and in which one may share.”³ Perhaps the term “relive” would work better. This dynamic remembrance includes a past, present, and future element.⁴

Past

No doubt the first thing we think of when we talk about remembering. Participating in the Lord’s supper motivates and empowers us by reminding us of the love and grace made available to us by Christ’s death (1 Corinthians 11:26).

³ Robert Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1972), 218.

⁴ Ibid., 218-225

Present

The fact that Paul calls this ordinance “the Lord’s supper” signifies some sort of fellowship with Christ. “An invitation to share a meal, especially to the Oriental, is an invitation to fellowship.”⁵

Theologians differ greatly over what exactly this looks like. In particular, what is the relationship between Christ and the elements (bread and juice/wine)?

- 1. Transubstantiation** – The Catholic view that the elements become the body and blood of Christ. The “substance” is changed but the “accidents” (color, taste, texture) remain the same. This view believes Christ is sacrificed every time the Mass is performed, violating Hebrews 10:10-14.⁶
- 2. Consubstantiation** – Primarily Lutheran view that says Christ’s body and blood are physically present *with* the elements.
- 3. Reformed/Calvinist** – This view “reject[s] the physical body presence. But it does believe that Christ is present through the spirit in such a way that His entire person – body and blood – is enjoyed in the supper.”⁷
- 4. Memorial** – The elements are simply symbols; Christ’s body and blood is not present. Christ’s words were clearly metaphorical, as the disciples would have understood them during that first supper. The fellowship a believer has with Christ is a spiritual fellowship, similar to Matthew 18:20, and with other believers.

Future

Christ also specifies in the Last Supper that he will not eat or drink this way again until the kingdom. Paul even said that communion proclaimed Christ’s death “until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). The Lord’s Supper is supposed to remind us that Christ is one day coming again to feast and fellowship with his people, and to give us a small taste of that in his absence.

⁵ Ibid., 220.

⁶ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 371-72.

⁷ Saucy, 223.