



“If we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection” (Romans 6:5).

The Church Ordinances

Truth: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the only New Testament church ordinances.

Cobb’s “Confession of Faith”: Article XIII

Text: Romans 6:1-6; I Corinthians 11:23-28

“We believe that scriptural baptism is the dipping into water by church authority of a believer in Christ. Baptism is performed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. It shows forth in a solemn and beautiful emblem the believer's faith in the crucified, buried, and risen Savior with its effect, his death to sin and resurrection to a new life. It is prerequisite to the privileges of a church relation, and to the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper the members of a church by the sacred use of the unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine are to commemorate together the undying love of Christ. The supper should always be preceded by a solemn self-examination” (Cobb's Baptist Church Manual, pages 81, 82).

An “ordinance” is a custom, practice, or rule which has been established by duly constituted authority. We use the term to refer to two beautiful rituals of the church called baptism and the Lord's Supper. An observance of the ordinances is an act of obedience to Christ, an act of worship of Christ, and an act of testimony about Christ.

I. THEIR NUMBER

There are two church ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Those two were placed in the church by Jesus himself.

He commanded us to make disciples, baptize them in the name of the

Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and then teach them to observe all He had commanded (Matthew 28:19, 20). That was how the ordinance of baptism was set in the church. The early church took that ordinance seriously. There is no record after the empowering of the church at Pentecost (Acts 2) of a conversion that was not followed by baptism. Every Christian was baptized in obedience to the ordinance of the Lord.

Jesus gave an example of breaking bread and drinking the fruit of the vine as a witness of His death (Luke 22: 14-20). He left that ritual for us to observe to “*shew the Lord's death till he come*” (1 Corinthians 11:26). So the ordinance of the Lord's Supper was set in the church.

Jesus commanded other things. Why are they not church ordinances? John 13:14, 15 reads, “*If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.*” Why is foot-washing not observed as a church ordinance?

A church ordinance must testify of Christ's work on our behalf. Baptism speaks of His death and resurrection. The Lord's Supper testifies that by His crucified body and shed blood we live and have our being. Foot-washing is an act of humility and bears no testimony to Christ's redemptive work. So we recognize only two church ordinances today.

II. THEIR NATURE

The ordinances are symbolic rituals which bear witness of spiritual truth. They are not sacraments, for a sacrament is thought to confer saving grace to the one who observes it.

The water of baptism is natural water. The bread and drink of the Lord's Supper are natural elements. They do not partake of a supernatural change so as to become different in substance. They are not endued with miraculous power to confer grace. They are the ordinary elements of nature.

The ordinances testify to an accomplished fact. They witness that we are already saved through Jesus' death and resurrection. They provide a means by which we testify publicly to our faith in Jesus. No ordinance is intended to help us secure forgiveness of sin or grace for living. It testifies only that we have received all we need in Jesus Christ.

III. THEIR DESCRIPTION

A. Baptism is the initial Christian ordinance. It is the first command of our Lord to one who receives Christ as Savior. Therefore the early

Christians practiced the immediate baptism of converts, not in order to save them but to obey the command of their new-found Lord (Acts 2:41; 16:33).

1. Institution: Baptism had been practiced as an initiatory rite among the Jews before the ministry of Jesus. John the Baptist baptized those who responded to his call to repentance in view of the approaching kingdom of God (Matthew 3:5-17). Jesus received baptism at the hands of John, and His disciples baptized converts He made by His teaching (Matthew 3:13-17; John 4:1-3). Jesus commanded baptism for those who were converted (Matthew 28:19, 20). The early church obeyed that command (Acts 2:41; 19:3, 5; 22:16), and so the ordinance was confirmed in the Christian community.

2. Mode: Christian baptism is the immersion in water of a believer in Jesus Christ. The Greek term *baptizo*, which is translated “baptize” in English, means ‘to dip, to plunge, to submerge, to immerse.’ The Bible makes it clear that the New Testament church practiced immersion. Baptism is a burial (Romans 6:4, 5). It is performed when candidate and administrator go “*down both into the water*,” the candidate is immersed and raised up, and they “*come up out of the water*” (Acts 8:38, 39). Anything short of immersion is not Christian baptism.

3. Purpose: Baptism is a symbolic act that testifies to personal faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior. It testifies that one who was dead in sin has been resurrected by Christ into new spiritual and eternal life. It is a deed of righteousness (Matthew 3:15) and can in no wise contribute to one's salvation from sin (Romans 3:20).

4. Candidate: Christian baptism is performed only upon a person who has repented of sin (Matthew 3:1-8) and is trusting Jesus Christ alone for salvation (Acts 8:36-38). That excludes all infants or persons who are not believers in Christ.

5. Administrator: Baptists have traditionally understood Matthew 28:18-20 to be Christ's authorization of the church to act in His behalf and baptize the converts she makes. Surely no one would deny that such an administrator is authorized to perform the act of Christian baptism.

B. The Lord's Supper is the repeated Christian ordinance. A Christian is baptized once, but he observes the Lord's Supper many times. That is fitting since baptism refers to his birth into Jesus Christ and death to sin, while the Lord's Supper refers to his daily sustenance from the Lord.

1. Elements: The Lord's Supper is observed with two elements common on one's table: bread and drink. Jesus took those two elements remaining from an observance of the Passover and instituted the Supper (Matthew 26:26, 27). He commanded us to use those two elements in observing the

Supper “*till he come*” (1 Corinthians 11:23-29).

The broken bread represents the crucified body of our Lord. The red liquid of the fruit of the vine represents the shed blood of our Lord. The eating and drinking represents our receiving His life and strength. No other elements need to be involved to show the spiritual truth clearly.

2. Participants: There are three attitudes among Christians concerning who should partake of the Supper. (1) Open communion means that anyone who believes in Jesus may observe it. (2) Close communion means that any member of a sister church — a church holding the same doctrine and practice — may join when a church observes it. (3) Closed communion means that only the members in good standing in the one congregation may observe it.

The Bible is quite clear that one must be a believer, have received scriptural baptism, and be living a life in accord with Christian doctrine and practice to receive the Supper. That limits the observance to “close” and “closed.” Each church must make her decision at that point. There are churches of both persuasions in our association of churches.

3. Administration: The Supper is to be observed in the assembly of Christians. There is no record in the New Testament of a private observance of the ordinances. The ordinance was observed in private homes because the churches commonly met in private homes (Acts 2:46; 20:7, 11; 27:35). The ordinance is kept pure by observance in church capacity.

IV. THE TESTIMONY

Both ordinances bear testimony to a past event. Baptism witnesses to a conversion in time past through faith in Christ. The Supper bears testimony to the sacrifice of Jesus (breaking His body and shedding His blood) at a time past.

But both ordinances testify also to the present application of that past event. Baptism is still practiced today because people are being saved through faith in the once-crucified but now-living Christ. The Lord's Supper is observed today because people are still drawing their sustenance from Christ to live the Christian life.

The ordinances look backward to what Christ has done, inward to what He is doing, and forward to what He will do when He returns at the end of the age. What a testimony!

V. THEIR PERPETUITY

The ordinances will continue to be observed until the Lord comes (I Corinthians 11:26). As long as people are being saved, we must baptize them. As long as Christians are living on earth, they must “eat and drink” of Christ. The ordinances will continue to the end of the age.

There is no reference to the church ordinances after the return of the Lord. They are pictures. We will need the pictures no longer when He whom they picture is personally present.

VI. THEIR IMPORTANCE

Nothing said above must leave the impression that the church ordinances are unimportant. The fact that they do not aid in our salvation or sanctification, for instance, must not be interpreted to mean they lack significance today. The ordinances are very important for the following reasons. (1) Observing the ordinances is an act of obedience to our Lord. (2) The ordinances give testimony to the world of the reality we have found in Jesus. (3) The ordinances are testimonies to our faith and strengthen us in our commitment to Christ. (4) The ordinances afford an opportunity for fellowship with one another and with our Lord in a solemn and beautiful ceremony. (5) The ordinances help to preserve the identity of the church. (6) The ordinances testify more clearly than our words to our relationship to Jesus Christ and to the sufficiency we have found in Him.

You should be faithful to observe the church ordinances. *“I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you. . . . For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you”* (1 Corinthians 11:2, 23). Observance of the ordinances is an act of worship and obedience to the Lord.

1. What do we mean by “church ordinance”?
2. How is a church ordinance distinguished from some other ritual?
3. Why do we speak of “ordinances” and not “sacraments”?
4. Why is there one baptism and many Suppers for a Christian?
5. What is the purpose of and who is the candidate for baptism?
6. Why are there only two elements in the Supper?
7. Who may participate at the Lord's Supper in your church?
8. What is the testimony of the two ordinances?
9. Why is it important to observe the ordinances?
10. How can you make the ordinances most meaningful when you observe them?

