

Ecclesiology

Topic 5 – Ordinances

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Definitions

Depending on denominational (or religious in the case of Catholicism) affiliation, different words are used to describe what Augustine in the 5th century called an outward sign of an inward and invisible grace.

Catholics believe that the outward signs are “sacraments”; that is, they are a means of grace through which God bestows spiritual blessing. As the church moved away from the age of the apostles, many “sacraments” developed. By the time of Augustine in the AD 400s some 300 sacraments were identified. As Roman Catholicism developed more fully and finally in a response to the protestant reformation, seven sacraments were identified by Catholics at the Council of Trent in the mid-1500s. For Catholics, the seven sacraments are: baptism, Eucharist (communion), confirmation, reconciliation (also called confession or penance), anointing the sick, matrimony, and holy orders.

Most Protestants believe the outward signs are just that, a sign and memorial (in the case of communion) and therefore call them “ordinances” or something prescribed by Christ as a sign/memorial. Most Protestants believe there are two ordinances given by Christ (some believe three), baptism and communion (and foot washing), since only these two observances are taught explicitly in the NT as commands of Jesus. Because they are symbolic and testimonial in nature, it is better to use the term “ordinance” rather than “sacrament”. The ordinances were ordained by Christ and are to be done in obedience to Christ, not to receive a mystical blessing. These ordinances do not convey grace to the participants.

Ordinances

There are two ordinances that are taught explicitly in the NT as commands by Jesus to be observed by the church: baptism and communion.

Baptism

¹⁸And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, **baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,** ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Matt 28:18-20

Communion or Lord’s Supper

¹⁴When the hour had come, He reclined *at the table*, and the apostles with Him. ¹⁵And He said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” ¹⁷And when He had taken a cup *and* given thanks, He said, “Take this and share it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes.” ¹⁹**And when He had taken *some* bread *and* given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”** ²⁰**And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.** Luke 22:14-20

²³For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; ²⁴and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” ²⁵In the same way *He took* the cup also after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me.” ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes. 1 Cor 11:23-26

Foot-washing?

Some protestant denominations add foot washing as an ordinance (many types of Baptist churches as well as the Brethren church). Roman Catholics observe foot washing during the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week.

In Bible times, people’s feet were dirty and it was a common sign of hospitality to have water provided to guests to wash their feet (e.g. Gen 18:4; 19:2; 43:24; Judg 19:21; Luke 7:36-50; 1 Tim 5:10).

²⁴Then the man brought the men into Joseph’s house and **gave them water, and they washed their feet**; and he gave their donkeys fodder. Gen 43:24

During the last supper, Jesus washed the disciple’s feet. Washing someone else’s feet was the task of the lowliest of servants. So, when Jesus moved to wash their feet, they were shocked.

³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, ⁴got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. ⁵Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. ⁶So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, “Lord, do You wash my feet?” ⁷Jesus answered and said to him, “What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter.” ⁸Peter said to Him, “Never shall You wash my feet!” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.” ⁹Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, *then wash* not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all *of you*.” ¹¹For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, “Not all of you are clean.” ¹²**So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. ¹⁶Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor *is* one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.** John 13:3-17

After Jesus had washed the disciples’ feet, he asked them, “Do you know what I have done to you?” Obviously, they knew what He had just done, but Jesus was asking what was the meaning of what He had just done. He was pointing to the example of what He had just done (v15).

Jesus was pointing to the example of humble service – a clear NT principle.

³Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. ⁸Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Phil 2:3-8

⁵You younger men, likewise, be subject to *your* elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. ⁶Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, ⁷casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. 1 Pet 5:5-7

If foot washing was to be an ordinance observed by the church, it is nowhere said so in the NT, unlike baptism and communion. We conclude then that Jesus washing the disciple's feet was an object lesson in humble service.

Baptism

Much of this information is from the VBC position paper on baptism.

Water baptism is the act in which a believer in Jesus Christ is immersed in water and raised up from it by another believer. Baptism was instituted by God to be the first step of obedience to demonstrate a believer's reception of the gospel. This initial act of baptism identifies the believer as a follower of Christ.

Jesus commanded baptism in the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20). He taught that as disciples are made they must be baptized.

¹⁸And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, **baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit**, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matt 28:18-20

Notice that He clearly separates "baptizing them" ahead of "teaching them to observe all that I commanded." Therefore, baptism in water is significant because it is the first step of obedience after exercising the gift of true saving faith.

And, the Apostles and first disciples obeyed! When Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 just after the founding of the church, "those who had received His word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). In similar fashion, Philip preached in Samaria and it is recorded that "when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike" (Acts 8:12).

Baptism does not produce salvation

It is important to note that being baptized in water does not produce salvation. The Scriptures clearly teach that we are saved apart from works (Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). All we can do is receive by faith the gift of eternal life from the gracious hand of God.

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. Eph 2:8-9

⁵**He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy**, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, Titus 3:5

Nor is baptism a necessary accompaniment of faith and essential for salvation (John 20:31; Acts 10:43-48; 11:16-18; 13:38-39; 15:6-11; 16:29-31; Rom 3:22; 4:9-11). The thief on the cross was never baptized, though he was destined to be with Jesus in paradise (Luke 23:39-43). In Acts 10:44-48, we clearly see people who have believed in Christ and have received the Holy Spirit prior to their baptism. Also, Paul saw baptism as separate from preaching the gospel (1 Cor 1:17). Therefore, while baptism is commanded, it is not essential for salvation.

⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, ⁴⁷“Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we *did*, can he?” ⁴⁸And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days. Acts 10:44-48

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. 1 Cor 1:17

There are a few passages that, when taken out of context, that some people attempt to use as proof texts to show that baptism is necessary for salvation:

Mark 16:9-20

Mark 16:9-20 seems to indicate that baptism is required for salvation.

While this passage in Mark does appear in most of the manuscripts that have been discovered, it does not appear in the best, most reliable manuscripts. Even though there is debate about whether this text belongs in Mark, the issue does not affect any biblical truth. All of what it includes is referenced in other places in the Bible. This is even true about supernatural protection from poisonous snakes (Acts 28:3-5).

The question here regarding baptism is, does Mark 16:16 teach that one must be baptized in order to be saved? The answer is no, for the following reasons:

- a. Since Mark 16 is a questionable passage textually, it alone should not form the foundation for any doctrine.
- b. Salvation is by the grace of God, through faith. No act on our part secures salvation, which is why Paul can say salvation is “not as a result of works that no man should boast” (Eph 2:8-9).
- c. No specific act is necessary to accompany the gift of salvation. If a specific act such as baptism were required, then the plethora of verses that promise salvation upon saving faith would be misleading (John 3:16; John 6:47, Titus 3:5, etc.).
- d. Mark 16:16 in fact does not teach that baptism is necessary for salvation. The distinctive criterion in Mark 16:16 for salvation is belief, not baptism. To help understand this point, listed below are the four options regarding belief and baptism, with only three of these options being addressed by Mark:
 - 1) You can disbelieve in Christ and not be baptized. This person is not saved and Mark 16:16 describes this person as condemned.
 - 2) You can disbelieve in Christ and be baptized. This person is also not saved and Mark 16:16 also describes this person as condemned.
 - 3) You can believe in Christ and be baptized. This person is saved and Mark 16:16 agrees with this.
 - 4) You can believe in Christ and not be baptized. This person is also saved. Mark 16:16 does not speak to this person’s condition.

Therefore, not only does the Scripture speak clearly that salvation does not come through works, such as baptism, but Mark is in harmony with this doctrine.

Acts 2:38

This passage in Acts also seems to indicate that baptism is required for salvation.

³⁷Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” ³⁸**Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.** ³⁹For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” ⁴⁰And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” ⁴¹So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. ⁴²They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Acts 2:37-42

Does Acts 2:38 teach that baptism is required to be saved? No, for the following reasons:

- a. Salvation is imparted to us by the grace of God, through our faith. No act on our part secures salvation, which is why Paul can say salvation is “not as a result of works that no man should boast” (Eph 2:8-9).
- b. No specific act is necessary to accompany the gift of salvation. If a specific act such as baptism were required, then the plethora of verses that promise salvation upon saving faith would be misleading and incomplete at the least (John 3:16; John 6:47, Titus 3:5, etc, etc).
- c. Luke earlier quotes Jesus as promising forgiveness on the basis of faith alone (Luke 24:47).
- d. Luke later quotes Paul as promising forgiveness on the basis of faith alone (Acts 13:38 and 26:18).
- e. Peter, the same speaker, is later quoted by Luke as promising forgiveness on the basis of faith alone (Acts 10:43).
- f. Acts 10:44-48 clearly describes Gentiles who have received the Holy Spirit, and thus were saved, before they were baptized. Therefore, baptism is not a necessary conditional for salvation.
- g. Paul separates baptism from the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 1:17. If baptism is necessary for salvation, then we should expect Paul to be much more involved in baptism than he was. Paul considered baptism as part of the growth process which others serve, not the planting process that he served (cf. 1 Cor 3:6).
- h. Acts 2:38 can be understood in either of two ways:
 - 1) The preposition “for” (eis in Greek) can mean “with a view to” or “on account of” or “on the basis of” or even “because of.” The word is used this way in Matthew 3:11; 12:14; and Mark 1:4. With this understanding of the word “for,” Acts 2:38 could be understood to teach that baptism was being called for by Peter because they had been forgiven of sin, not in order to achieve the forgiveness of sin. However, this is not the common usage of this preposition and its normal meaning is “for.”
 - 2) A better interpretation is to observe that the Greek words “repent” and “your” are plural while the imperative “be baptized” is singular, setting it off from the rest of the verse. Therefore the verb repent is connected to the forgiveness of your sins. The verse would then read something like, “Y’all repent for the forgiveness of all y’all’s sins and y’all will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and let each individual person be baptized.”

The meaning of water baptism

Baptism is the first step in obedience of the new believer (Acts 8:36-38).

³⁶As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch *said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” ³⁷[And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”] ³⁸And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. Acts 8:36-38

Baptism is the outward testimony to the world that the believer is identifying himself with Christ in death and resurrection to new life (Rom 6:1-11) and with the Body of Christ (Acts 2:41).

¹What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? ²May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? ³Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection, ⁶knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Him*, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; ⁷for he who has died is freed from sin. ⁸Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, ⁹knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. ¹⁰For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. ¹¹Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Rom 6:1-11

Baptism in water is simply an outward expression (a sermon without words) of the inward fact of one’s salvation. It is certainly appropriate to have a spoken word of testimony from the person being baptized, but even if he or she does not say a word, the action itself communicates very clearly and effectively. It is as if the person stood up and made a public proclamation of identification as a follower of Jesus Christ. This is what makes water baptism so meaningful, it is our “initial identification with Christ.”

The word “baptize” is translated from the Greek word “baptizo” which is a form of the word “bapto,” meaning “to dip.” It was used to describe the action of a blacksmith tempering hot iron by dipping it in water; the term also depicted a dyer placing a cloth into dye in order to tint the material. Baptism pictures outwardly what the Holy Spirit has accomplished inwardly by placing the believer into union with Jesus Christ (Rom 6:3-4) and into Christ’s spiritual body, which is the church (1 Cor 12:13).

¹What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? ²May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? ³Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. Rom 6:1-4

¹³For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 1 Cor 12:13

Baptism in water pictures this spiritual union with Christ. It demonstrates our new relationship and identification with the Lord Jesus Christ. When we trust in Jesus Christ, we are placed into Christ, united with Him in the likeness of His death and resurrection (Rom 6:6). When we are placed into the water in baptism it symbolizes what has occurred spiritually in our lives.

⁶knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; Rom 6:6

The importance of water baptism

Beyond being commanded (Acts 2:38), baptism is important because it is an act of obedience which identifies a person as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is a demonstration of the fact that one has believed the good news and thus has personally received Jesus Christ as Lord.

We can see that baptism is an identification with Christ because when it occurs it is with new believers in Christ. When an individual came to belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ, they were immediately commanded to be baptized (Acts 2:38; 10:48; 22:16).

In response to this command, the new Christians were quick to demonstrate their desire to obey Christ as Lord of their lives (Acts 2:41; 8:36-38; 10:44-48; 16:32; 33; 22:16). Jesus himself saw baptism as an act of obedience in which He didn't delay (Matt 3:15). Therefore, baptism is important because it is the first step of obedience.

³⁸Peter *said* to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." ⁴⁰And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" ⁴¹So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. Acts 2:38-41

⁴³"Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." ⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, ⁴⁷"Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" ⁴⁸And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days. Acts 10:43-48

In NT times, baptism was extremely important. While Christians today are often baptized long after the time when they first embraced Christ as their Lord and Savior, the early church did not hesitate. The practice of these first believers shows the importance of baptism in the life of new converts to Christ.

The requirement of water baptism

Since baptism is commanded and is important, every believer must be baptized. We do not have the freedom to opt out of God's desire for our life. There is one condition for baptism, exercising true saving faith in Christ. When baptism was performed in the NT, belief was always a requirement (Acts 2:38; 8:12; 16:31-33; 18:8; 19:1-7). In Matthew 28:19, the command to baptize follows the command to make disciples. John the Baptist required repentance and the confession of sin (Matt 3:2-6). Therefore, only those who have placed their faith in Christ should be baptized.

A number of Christian denominations practice infant baptism. Many believers have had this done to them when they were little, only to realize later that the Scripture requires them to trust in Christ for their salvation prior to baptism. They have then rightly chosen to be baptized as a believer in Christ, knowing that their infant baptism did not fulfill the command to believe and be baptized. Baptism is an act that is done by the one being baptized, not simply an act done to them. Baptism is of no use apart from a proper heart attitude (1 Pet 3:21).

²¹Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you--not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience--through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 1 Pet 3:21

At what age can a child be baptized? Since the requirement is belief in Christ, younger children are able to follow Christ in baptism. However, determining the age when a child is too young can be subjective, varying with each child. Also, the younger the child is, the stronger the desire to be baptized simply to please a parent or other people.

In order to balance the need for those who believe to be baptized with the desire to not lead people to do something that is not coming from a conviction of their heart, at VBC our children's ministry informs older grade school children about baptism and our youth ministry encourages baptism, in cooperation with the parents.

The method of water baptism

Various Christian churches baptize in different ways. The methods (called "modes") used include sprinkling (the head), pouring (over the head), and immersion (submerging the whole body). As can be seen from the usage of the word, immersion best agrees with the basic force of "baptizo". The Greek language has words for pouring or sprinkling, but these words were never used in connection with baptism.

Also, there is great evidence that the early followers of Christ understood baptism to be by immersion. For example, John the Baptist baptized where there was "much water" (John 3:23), Jewish proselytes were submersed in a tank of water, a practice which we would naturally expect the church to continue, and every case of baptism in the NT could have been done with immersion. In addition, immersion best fits the illustration of death to the old life and being raised to new life (Rom 6:1-4).

While VBC practices baptism by immersion, we acknowledge that the most important issue is the identification with Christ rather than the method of baptism. Therefore, we recognize baptisms that were performed in a different manner as long as the believer understood what they were doing in baptism.

All Christians are commanded to make disciples which includes baptizing them and teaching them (Matt 28:19). There is no biblical restriction on who must do the baptizing. If 3,000 people were baptized in Acts 2:41, it is likely that more than the apostles were doing the baptizing in order to finish in one day. Indeed, the person who does the baptizing is not significant (1 Cor 1:14-17) for there is no special grace that God dispenses through an individual at baptism. It is the act of obedience itself that is the focus and any baptized believer is fully capable of serving in this ministry.

Conclusion

Baptism is the first step in obedience of the new believer (Acts 8:36-38) and the outward testimony to the world that the believer is identifying himself with Christ in death and resurrection to new life (Rom 6:1-11) and with the Body of Christ (Acts 2:41). Baptism pictures outwardly what the Holy Spirit has accomplished inwardly by placing the believer into union with Jesus Christ (Rom 6:3-4) and into Christ's spiritual body, which is the church (1 Cor 12:13).

Have you obeyed Christ in baptism?

Communion

Much of this information is from the VBC position paper on the Lord's Supper.

Christians have been celebrating the Lord's Supper, or communion, ever since Christ instructed His disciples to continue to do so until He returns. This is done by partaking in bread and juice (or wine) together in a local church setting. However, different churches understand and practice of communion differently. The NT teaches the meaning and motivation for observing communion.

²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took *some* bread, and after a blessing, He broke *it* and gave *it* to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." ²⁷And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. ²⁹"But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." ³⁰After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Matt 26:26-30 (see also Mark 14:22-26)

¹⁴When the hour had come, He reclined *at the table*, and the apostles with Him. ¹⁵And He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷And when He had taken a cup *and* given thanks, He said, "Take this and share it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹And when He had taken *some* bread *and* given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." ²⁰And in the same way *He took* the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood. Luke 22:14-20

¹⁷But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. ¹⁹For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you. ²⁰Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, ²¹for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. ²²What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you. ²³For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; ²⁴and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." ²⁵in the same way *He took* the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me." ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. ²⁷Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. ²⁸But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. ³⁰For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. ³¹But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. ³³So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. ³⁴If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment. The remaining matters I will arrange when I come. 1 Cor 11:17-34

The Principle: The Reality of the Lord's Supper

1. The Lord's Supper was established by Christ.

1 Corinthians 11:23-25 quotes the Lord Jesus as calling His Church to follow His example of taking bread and the cup with the phrase "*do this in remembrance of Me.*" Christ instituted this practice during the last supper and because of the command "*do this,*" it is not optional for the Christian. It is a practice established by the authority of Christ, not the church.

2. The Lord's Supper is an ordinance of the church.

Ordinance is an important word and helps to clarify the meaning of the communion. An ordinance is an outward rite prescribed by Christ to be performed by His church. As an ordinance, it does not bring special grace in and of itself. Some churches call the Lord's Supper a "sacrament," or something that is set apart as sacred and consider the ceremony and elements to be holy in and of themselves. Only two observances, baptism and communion, are taught explicitly in the NT as commands of Jesus, and because they are symbolic and testimonial in nature, it is better to use the term ordinance rather than sacrament. They were ordained by Christ and are to be done in obedience to Christ, not to receive a supposed mystical blessing.

3. The Lord's Supper is symbolic in nature.

Communion is an "outward expression" of an "inward reality." In this way it is similar to baptism, which is an outward expression of the inner reality of our death, burial and rising to newness of life with Christ as His substitute sacrifice for our sin takes effect on our behalf.

The elements of bread and wine are clearly symbolic. Jesus simply took the unleavened bread and wine of the Passover dinner and incorporated them as the elements to be used in communion, to symbolize His body and blood. This contradicts flawed views that have been traditionally held throughout church history:

- Transubstantiation is found in the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. It teaches that as part of the ceremony, the bread and wine literally change into the body and blood of Jesus.
- Consubstantiation is found in the teaching of the Lutheran Church. It teaches that Christ's literal presence does not replace but is added to the bread and wine and likewise imparts grace.
- The teaching of reformed churches retains the real presence of Christ in the elements, but claim that special presence is spiritual, not physical.

When Jesus said, "*this is my body,*" and "*this is my blood*" (1 Cor 11:24-25) we must consider the meaning of these words to the hearers. The disciples would have most clearly understood them as nothing more than a picture of a spiritual truth, as Jesus often used illustrations from daily life for the purpose of teaching.

They would not have sat at the Last Supper and believed that Jesus' words "*this is My body,*" (Matt 26:26) meant the bread was literally His body. As He was still in His earthly body when He spoke, His disciples would have no more considered the bread physical extension of His flesh anymore than when Jesus said "*I am the door*" (John 10:9) they considered Him to be hardware or when He said, "*I am the true vine*" (John 15:1) they considered Him to be a plant.

The meaning of our Lord's words is this: "*This bread represents my body. This wine represents my blood.*" There is absolutely no indication that He meant or His disciples understood Him to mean any more than that. The Lord's Supper is symbolic and represents Christ's death for our remembrance, much as the memorials in the OT caused Israel to remember God's work on their behalf (Josh 22:26-29). Indeed, Jesus' words were given in the context of Passover, which also was given as a memorial to remember God's work (Ex 12:14).

¹⁴Now this day will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it *as* a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations you are to celebrate it *as* a permanent ordinance.
Ex 12:14

The Purpose: The Remembrance of Christ

1. The Lord's Supper is a memorial to remember Christ's death.

Many people erect memorials to remember their dead. Christians stop at the Lord's table to remember, not millions, but "The One" who suffered and died for each of us. But, just as the Ark of the Covenant in the OT had no inherent power, there is no inherent power or supernatural effect in the elements of communion.

The bread and wine are not holy in and of themselves. The act of eating and drinking the bread and wine is not holy in and of itself. In other words, special grace is not conferred upon us by our observance of the Lord's Supper. It is not a means by which God conveys His grace to sinners. God's grace is conveyed to us by Christ alone, through faith alone. That is not the purpose of a memorial. Its purpose is to *remember* Christ's death and the commitment that comes from our belief in Christ.

2. A memorial reminds us of something or somebody.

Remember in the OT when the children of Israel crossed over the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land. The first thing Joshua did was to set up a pillar of stones *as a memorial*. Its purpose was to remind the future generations of Israel about the faithfulness of God in keeping His covenant promises by bringing the people out of bondage in Egypt, caring for them in the wilderness, and bringing them into the Land.

Communion is a memorial that reminds us of God's faithfulness when He fulfilled His covenant to us by providing Jesus as a substitute sacrifice for the payment of our sin debt. 1 Corinthians 11:24-26 explains it like this:

²⁴and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." ²⁵in the same way *He took* the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me." ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. 1 Cor 11:24-26

The Participation: The Requirement for Communion

1. The Lord's Supper is for all believers.

VBC holds to an "open communion" where all believers are welcome to participate in the communion service. This is in contrast to those who advocate a "closed communion" and believe the local church must assume responsibility by administering the ordinance only to members of their local fellowship. Some others hold to a "closed communion" and require the ordinance to be administered by the local church and require that participants be a member of their denomination, or in some cases, a baptized member of a Christian church.

We believe that communion is for all believers because all believers are instructed to participate in the ordinance. Indeed, it is called “the cup of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27), which extends beyond our fellowship alone to all who are the Lord’s people.

²⁷Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks **the cup of the Lord** in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. 1 Cor 11:27

Furthermore, the limitations that are given for participation in the Lord’s Supper are given for the person themselves (1 Cor 11:28). While each person is told to examine himself, the church is not given that same instruction to examine the individuals.

²⁸**But a man must examine himself**, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 1 Cor 11:28

It is important to note that each person is to take it seriously as advised in 1 Cor 11:27-30.

²⁷Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. ²⁸But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. ³⁰For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. ³¹But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. 1 Cor 11:27-32

The church was not given the role of determining if a person is examining himself rightly. This would be a very difficult task to say the least. Because we view the elements as symbolic in their nature, we feel no need to protect them from being abused. The problem exists within the heart of the partaker.

There is no age limitation to this ordinance. If children are believers in Christ, they ought to partake with the rest of the church. Of course, they must be able to understand the meaning of the Lord’s Supper in order to honor the Lord in its observance.

2. We should examine ourselves.

Before we partake of the Lord’s Supper we should examine our hearts and lives (1 Cor 11:28). This is not meant to condemn us. It simply means we must be sure we are not harboring any sin which comes between our soul and the Savior. Communion is an opportunity to make everything right with God and renew our commitment to walk in the Spirit. This also means we should make sure we do not harbor resentment or other ill feelings toward a fellow Christian. Those who are forgiven are characterized as being forgiving (Matt 6:12). This brings to us a great opportunity to grow in holiness.

3. We should partake in a worthy manner.

None of us is worthy to stand before God. None of us deserve what God did for us through His Son. That is the great message of God’s grace and mercy. But, we can make sure we take communion in a worthy manner, rather than carelessly.

The Bible says that if we eat the bread and drink the cup in an unworthy manner, we are eating and drinking judgment on ourselves, because we are failing to discern or recognize the Lord’s body (1 Cor 11:29). When a person does not take communion seriously they treat the Lord Himself with indifference. Therefore He calls for an examination of our motives to keep us from God’s corrective discipline, which might include sickness or even death.

The Place: The Role of the Church

1. Communion is for a gathering of believers in Christ.

It appears that communion is not a celebration to be observed privately, but publicly. It is an ordinance for redeemed sinners, for believers, for men and women who are born again by the power and grace of God through the death of His Son. The Lord Jesus gathered His disciples together for the Supper and the church of Corinth collectively was instructed to eat the bread and drink the cup. Note 1 Corinthians 11:26 speaks of the eating, drinking and proclaiming in a plural sense while 11:27 speaks of the examining in a singular sense. The gathering of people (plural) partake together and each individual (singular) must examine himself.

2. Communion is for the church, not necessarily in a church.

The early church did not have church buildings. In fact, they met in homes, even for the Lord's Supper, the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42-47). The church is not the special place for communion; it can be done among any gathering of believers in Christ.

⁴²They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ... ⁴⁶Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47

The frequency for the celebration of the Lord's Supper is often set by the times the church gathers in the church building. Thus some advocate a weekly communion. The Word of God does not determine for us how often we should celebrate the Lord's Supper, other than to say "*As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup*" (1 Cor 11:26), indicating flexibility in terms of frequency. While the early church appears to have celebrated the Lord's Supper on a daily basis in connection with meals (Acts 2:46), this description is not commanded in the Bible. Suffice it to say that some of the most meaningful times of remembering Christ are apart from church buildings.

3. Communion is to be led by the church.

In many churches, the qualifications for leading communion are substantial. Most view the communion time as ceremonial and beyond the average Christian to perform. Yet there are few biblical requirements for the one leading a communion service.

The leader should be fulfilling the ministry of their local church. Since Christ established the church, baptizing all believers into His body, the church, and since communion was given to the church, it should be celebrated in the context of the church. This means that the leader should be recognized as carrying out the ministry oversight of the elders of the local church. Also, the leader should fulfill the exhortations of 1 Corinthians 11:26-30, namely to partake in a worthy manner, examining himself. This should be true of all that participate in the Lord's Supper.

The Profit: The Response to Christ

1. Communion encourages us.

Public observance of communion is of great practical value to our lives, allowing us to:

- Examine ourselves -- We acknowledge our sin and need of a Savior, acknowledging His grace in salvation and sanctification.
- Personally testify -- We present the message of Christ's sacrifice for sin.
- Strongly confirm -- We state our faith and commitment to His Lordship.
- Excitedly react -- We live as if Christ's return is imminent. It is!

By partaking of communion as an act of obedience, we show the Savior that we trust Him and are grateful for salvation. At the same time, we testify before men that our faith is in the living Christ, and that we expect Him to come again.

2. Communion encompasses us.

Observance of communion is multi-dimensional. When we come to the table of the Lord it is appropriate to look in three directions.

a. We look behind to past work of Christ's death.

The Lord's Supper looks back to Calvary and the death of Jesus on our behalf. Jesus said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the bread we see a symbol of Christ's body that was given for us. In the cup we see a symbol of His blood that was shed. A backward glance instills gratitude to Christ for the price He paid for our salvation. This should move us to greater love and thus obedience to Him.

b. We look ahead to future work of Christ's return.

We look ahead in time. "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." This ordinance shall remain a focal point of our worship until the Lord returns. At that time He will be with us and there will be no need for reminders. A forward glance reminds us of the promise of His return and the joy of living with Him in His kingdom and motivates us to "holy conduct and godliness" (2 Pet 3:11).

c. We look inside to the present work of Christ's Spirit.

Paul said we should partake of the Supper after a prayerful, personal evaluation.

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; ²⁴And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way. Psa 139:23-24

We should ask ourselves questions like, "Am I right with God?", "Have I done anything to disrupt fellowship with Him?", "Am I in good standing with others in the body of Christ?", and "Are my attitudes and actions consistent with my profession of faith?" These are good questions to ask.

The Spirit will use the time of communion to build a heart within us that is yielded to Him and sensitive to His will. A current probe into our souls, confessing our sins and making things right before we partake of communion can be a powerful tool to help us mature toward a righteous life.

Summary

The Lord's Supper is a remembrance of the Lord's death and should be observed until He returns. The remembrance should only be partaken of in a worthy manner. Just like man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27), so the man was not made for the Lord's Supper but the Lord's Supper was made for man. It was not given as a ritual to follow mindlessly or to infuse us with special grace from God. Our Lord gave us this ordinance as an external expression of our inward faith to encourage us to remember His sacrifice for sin and to renew our commitment to follow Him with our whole heart.

Do you obey Christ by partaking of communion in a worthy manner?

Questions to Ponder

1. What reasons might people give for not being baptized?
2. For those that have believed in Christ, are there any valid reasons for not being baptized?
3. Are there any biblical criteria for believing one should be baptized more than once?
4. If someone refuses to be baptized, does this say something about their commitment to Christ?
5. Is there any biblical criteria for the baptizer (the one performing the baptism)?
6. Describe a worthy and unworthy way in which someone can partake of the Lord's Supper.
7. Do you stop to prayerfully examine yourself before partaking of the communion?