

Foundations: Bible Truths for Christian Growth

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Baptism and communion, the two ordinances of the church, are precious parts of the Christian's worship. Yet, both are tragically misunderstood. It seems that every denomination has a different understanding of their purposes and meaning, resulting in grave errors and unnecessary confusion. As with other topics, our desire is to discover and apply what the Bible teaches about these two important activities.*

**Baptism and the Lord's Table are referred to as the two "ordinances" of the local church because they were ordained by Christ as a memorial of His work on the cross.*

Part 1: Baptism

The Purpose of Baptism

Before we study what baptism *does* accomplish, it is vital that we understand what baptism *does not* accomplish.

1. **Baptism does not save you.**

Read **Acts 16:16–34**, the record of the salvation of a jailer in the city of Philippi. Verses 30–33 are the important verses for this lesson.

What was the jailer's question (v. 30)? _____

What answer did Paul and Silas give (v. 31)? _____

In Chapter 1 you learned that the word "believe" in the New Testament means to *place faith in someone*. Paul told the jailer that there is one thing necessary

for salvation—faith in Jesus Christ. Notice that baptism was *not* part of Paul’s answer.

Look back at verse 32–33. When were the jailer and his family baptized (v. 33) in relation to their salvation (v. 31–32)? _____

2. Baptism does not wash away your sins.

Many people believe that baptism washes away sins, but Scripture teaches otherwise. According to **1 John 1:7**, only one thing is able to wash away sins.

What is it? _____

Remember, you are cleansed from your sins the moment you receive Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, and you are baptized *after* that point. By the time you are baptized, your sins have already been washed away!

This point is extremely important. *If baptism were able to wash away sin, then Jesus’ death was unnecessary.* You are cleansed with the shed blood of Christ, not with water.

3. Baptism does not earn you special favor with God.

Some churches teach that baptism is a *means of grace*. That means that baptism is a way of gaining God’s grace. However, grace is undeserved kindness. You cannot earn something that is undeserved! So in that sense, there is no such thing as a means of grace—you cannot earn God’s favor.

If baptism does not save you, cleanse you or earn special favor with God, *then why be baptized?* The Bible lists at least three reasons:

Reason #1: Baptism was commanded by Jesus Christ. The primary reason for being baptized is that Christ commanded it. Every Christian needs to be baptized in order to be obedient to Christ.

Read **Matthew 28:19–20**. After assuming that His hearers will “go,” what three commands did Christ give His disciples in these verses?

The order of the three commands is important. Notice that baptism immediately follows *making disciples*, or salvation. Baptism is not a part of salvation, but it should follow very closely. The very first step of obedience that a new Christian takes should be baptism.

You can be a Christian without being baptized, but you will never be more than a disobedient Christian.

Reason #2 Baptism identifies you with Jesus Christ. The word *baptize* was used in the first century to describe the process by which cloth was dyed. When a white cloth is immersed into a dye, the cloth comes into the dye and the dye into the cloth. The two become one. Similarly, each person who has received Jesus Christ as Savior has been *immersed* into Christ. At the moment of salvation, He came into us and we came into Him (remember chapter 2: You are *in Christ*).

Water baptism is an *outward* symbol of an *inward* reality. Our immersion into water pictures our immersion into Christ. Read **Galatians 3:27**. It describes your *spiritual* baptism, which became a reality the moment you were saved. Water baptism follows spiritual baptism and symbolizes it.

Spiritual Baptism

- Takes place at the moment of salvation.
- You are “immersed” into Christ, permanently joining you to Him.
- This is a spiritual, inward reality.

Water Baptism

- Takes place following salvation and is not part of salvation.
- You are immersed into water as a picture of your union with Christ.
- This is a physical, outward symbol.

Read **Romans 6:1–7**. Verses 3–5 teach that when we were baptized into Christ (spiritual baptism), we took part in His death, burial and resurrection. We are spiritually dead to sin, yet alive to “walk in newness of life” (v. 4). This truth is pictured by water baptism by immersion: being completely submerged into water pictures Christ’s death and burial and our death to sin. Emerging from the water pictures Christ’s resurrection and our new life. Just as Jesus died, was buried and rose again, so every believer is *dead to sin* and *alive to God*.

Reason #3: Baptism is your testimony for Jesus Christ. Another important reason for being baptized is that it is a testimony of your salvation—it shows to others that you have trusted Christ as your Savior. Hence, baptism in the Bible was often a very public event (e.g., **Matthew 3:6, Acts 2:38, 41**).

“With this ring...”

A good illustration of baptism’s importance as a testimony is a wedding ring. Why do people wear wedding rings?

Do wedding rings *make* people married? _____

Is it possible to be married without wearing a ring? _____

Is it possible to wear a ring without being married? _____

A wedding ring is a *symbol* of marriage and baptism is a *symbol* of salvation. Just as a wedding ring does not make someone married, baptism doesn’t make someone a Christian. People wear wedding rings to *demonstrate* to others that they have already been married. Similarly, Christians are baptized to *demonstrate* to others that they have already been saved. Just as someone could wear a wedding ring without being married, many people have been baptized, but never truly saved.

Conversely, just as someone can be married without wearing a ring, someone can be saved without being baptized...though the “spouse” would be displeased in both circumstances.

Those who are preparing to be baptized should take seriously the importance of what they are doing and pray about what they will say. Often you will have the opportunity to describe how you came to know Christ as Savior. Do it, and pray for the Lord to use your testimony. Many people have come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior as a result of seeing a friend or family member baptized. Your act of obedience may become an opportunity to give the gospel to someone who needs Christ!

The Prerequisite for Baptism

We have learned that it is important to obey Christ by being baptized, but let's review when it should take place.

Acts 2:41 says, “*So then, those who had _____ were baptized.*”

Read **Acts 8:5–6**. What was Philip doing? _____

Continue reading in verse 12. What did the people of Samaria do with Philip's message “the good news” (or the gospel)? _____

The phrases “received his word” (Acts 2:41) and “believed” (Acts 8:12) both refer to faith in Christ. What is the prerequisite for baptism? _____

Once again we see that baptism immediately *follows* salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. The same sequence is seen in **Matthew 28:19–20** and **Acts 16:31–33**.

The Perversion of Baptism

Unfortunately, baptism is misunderstood by many people and mistaught by many religions. Some misunderstand its purpose. Others are mistaken regarding who is to be baptized. Still others err on the mode (or method) of baptism. Let's quickly address these three errors.

1. The *baptismal regeneration* error.

Baptismal regeneration is a mouthful, but its meaning is simple. Some churches teach that a person is not born again (regenerated) until they are baptized. Some even refer to baptism as “the

“Baptism no more makes one a Christian, than putting a crown on one’s head makes him a king.”

Augustus Strong ⁹

ticket to Heaven.” The evidence against this teaching is abundant. As stated previously, salvation precedes baptism (**Acts 8:36–37; 16:31–33**).

2. The *infant baptism* error.

Several churches teach that a child must be baptized in order to wash away his original sin. However, Scripture has much to say in opposition to this teaching, as well.

First, we have already noted that sins are washed away by Christ’s blood, not water (**1 John 1:7**).

Second—as we have repeated time and time again—baptism in Scripture always follows salvation. If a baby is not old enough to understand repentance from sin and faith in Christ, how can he give testimony of salvation through baptism? The baby has not chosen Christ and therefore cannot choose baptism. The idea that the decision of a parent is somehow credited to or held against a child is absolutely contrary to Scripture.

Finally, infant baptism is unnecessary. Many parents fear—at their church’s insistence—that an

⁹ *Systematic Theology* (1907), p. 597.

infant who dies without being baptized is destined for punishment in hell. Yet, Scripture's hope for grieving parents is based in God's grace, not a church's water.

What statement did the grieving King David make when his baby died just after its birth (**2 Samuel 12:23**)? _____

Parents can rest assured that their baby is safe even in the event of an untimely death—not because of baptism, but because of God's grace. The evidence is staggering: the Bible *never* records a single example of a baby being baptized.

3. The mode of baptism error.

Mode of baptism refers to how someone is baptized. Some churches believe in sprinkling water on someone's head (called *aspersion*) or pouring it (called *affusion*). However, the Bible teaches baptism by *immersion*.

The first reason for baptism by immersion is the meaning of the word. Baptize comes from the Greek word "*baptizo*", meaning *to dip*. As stated earlier, it was a term used to describe the process of dipping (or immersing) an object completely into liquid.

Second, baptism is a picture of Christ's death, burial and resurrection, all of which are symbolized by immersion.

A final reason for baptism by immersion is seen in the Bible's record of baptisms. What is the common wording in the following baptism records:
Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10 & Acts 8:39.

This last reason is the weakest of the three. However, the three arguments together provide conclusive evidence that immersion is the prescribed mode of baptism.

Biblical baptism is *baptism by immersion*. Only those who have already repented of sin and trusted Jesus Christ as Savior may participate in it. Hence, it is called *believer's baptism*.

Part 2: Communion

The second ordinance of the church is *communion*, *the Lord's Table*, *the Lord's Supper*, or *the breaking of bread*.

The terms are used interchangeably. As with baptism, many people ignore the clear teaching of Scripture and pervert communion. Therefore, it is vital that you know what the Bible has to say about it.

The Purpose of Communion

Like believer's baptism, communion was commanded by the Lord and is a memorial of His sacrificial death on the cross. **Luke 22:7–20** records the very first observance of the Lord's Table. Christ had entered Jerusalem with His disciples just prior to His crucifixion. He had them prepare the **Passover** meal, a memorial celebrated by Jews each year. The Passover was a God-ordained celebration which commemorated the Jews' deliverance from Egypt by the Lord. At the time of the Exodus from Egypt (some fifteen centuries before Christ's earthly ministry), each Jewish family had been commanded to sacrifice a Passover lamb in order to avoid the wrath which God sent against Egypt (**Exodus 12:13**).

Almost 1500 years later, Christ entered Jerusalem and died during the Passover celebration. The symbolism here is rich: *Christ is the new Passover Lamb*, slain to provide salvation from sin for all who believe! The Old Testament sacrifices were a foreshadowing of Christ's sacrificial death. At the institution of the Lord's Table, Christ identified Himself as the perfect and final Passover Lamb, slain to provide deliverance from sin.

What is Christ called in **John 1:29**? _____

What does John say Christ is able to do? _____

Compare **Hebrews 10:4** with **1 John 1:7**. What can Christ do that Old Testament sacrifices could not?

Read **Luke 22:7–20** and answer the following questions:

In verse 19, what did Christ use to represent His body? _____

Unleavened Bread

The bread which Christ used in instituting the Lord's Table was the unleavened bread of the Passover. Leaven is often used in Scripture as a symbol for sin. Christ was sinless—"a lamb unblemished and spotless" (1 Peter 1:19)—as is symbolized by the unleavened bread.

Why would Christ's body be "given for you" (v. 19; see v. 15)? _____

Jesus instructed the disciples to eat the bread "in remembrance of me" (v. 19). What does that mean?

Following the bread, Christ used something as a representative of His blood (v. 20). What was it?

The “cup” means the drink or juice used during Communion.

Why was Christ’s blood so important for our salvation? (See **Hebrews 9:22** and **1 John 1:7**.)

The Apostle Paul used the first communion to teach later believers how and why to continue it. Read **1 Corinthians 11:23–31**. As He did with the bread, Christ said that the cup was to be taken “in remembrance of me” (v. 25). He concludes in verse 26 that when we eat the bread and drink from the cup we “proclaim the Lord’s death.” The bread and juice are simply symbols which help us remember and show Christ’s death!

Communion is first of all a remembrance of Christ’s death. However, it is also a reminder of something else (**1 Corinthians 11:26** and **Luke 22:16 & 18**).

What is it? _____

No wonder the Lord’s Table is so precious to Christians! It is a memorial of Christ’s death for our sins and a reminder that Christ will return to take us to be with Him in heaven! There is indeed cause for a memorial celebration. Yet, it must be observed solemnly and carefully.

Participating in Communion

In **1 Corinthians 11:27–31**, Paul warns against taking the Lord’s Table “in an unworthy manner.”

The Lord is serious about this warning—what are some extreme examples of judgment for abuse of the Lord’s Table (v. 30)? _____

We need to be careful to partake of the Lord’s Table in a worthy fashion! What does that mean?

1. Only Christians should partake of the Lord’s Table.

Anyone who has not trusted Jesus Christ as Savior cannot “judge the body rightly” (*take communion with understanding and judgment* —v. 29). Further, Christ set this precedent at the institution of the Lord’s table: Judas (an unbeliever) departed to betray Jesus *before* the Lord’s Supper and so was not present to partake (see **John 13:21–30** and **Mark 14:21–22**). Communion is for Christians!

2. Only Christians who are in fellowship with God should partake of the Lord’s Table.

Between the warnings in **1 Corinthians 11:27 & 29** is a command in **verse 28**. What is it? _____

What promise is given those who “judge themselves” (v. 31)?

Psalm 139:23–24 is a good passage to consider during this time of self–examination and confession. Once you are sure that there is no unconfessed sin hindering your fellowship with the Lord, you are free to partake of the Lord’s Table.

3. Christians must partake of the Lord's Table reverently.

Communion is not something to be taken lightly. Rather, it is a time of worship, remembering Christ's

death. If communion is intended to be a memorial of Christ's death for you, what should your mind dwell on during the communion service (in addition to self-examination)? Be specific.

Through the Lord's table we look...

backward to Christ's death,
forward to His coming and
inward at our own hearts.

4. Christians must partake of the Lord's Table in unity.

The Lord's Table provides the church an opportunity to fellowship with the

The Lord's Supper is "the simple rite which at once expressed the domestic (family) idea of the Church and the worth of Christ's death, while it separated the partakers from this crooked generation and bound them into one."

Alexander Maclaren ¹⁰

Lord (vertically) and with one another (horizontally).

It is not a private ordinance, but a public one, one for which the disciples "gathered together" (**Acts 20:7**).

Indeed, it seems that the Lord's Table was commonly (if not

exclusively) observed in conjunction with a love feast, a meal taken together as a symbol of the church's family-like unity.

Sadly, the church at Corinth had been abusing this time. It had become a huge feast for the rich, while the poor had nothing, promoting division rather than

¹⁰ *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), p. 24.

unity (1 **Corinthians 11:18–22, 33–34**). This is the opposite of observing communion in a worthy manner.

The church at Jerusalem provides a far better example in **Acts 2:42–44**. What four things did Christians continue doing (v. 42)? _____

What was their attitude toward each other (v. 44)?

A final note about communion is in order. Unlike baptism, which is practiced only once following salvation, the Lord’s Table is repeated. Why? (see **1 Corinthians 11:26**) _____

The Perversion of Communion

1. The *means of grace* error.

This point was made earlier (p. 57) about baptism. Contrary to the teaching of many religions, there are no special ways of obtaining God’s grace. Grace is given freely, not in response to an act intended to earn it.

2. The *Mass* error.

It is believed by some that during every observance of the Lord’s Table (referred to as the “Eucharist” as part of the Mass), the Lord is crucified again. This is a very

The Lord’s Table is a **remembrance** of Christ’s death, not a **repetition** of it!

serious doctrinal error because it calls into question the sufficiency of Christ's death on the cross.

According to **1 Peter 3:18**, how many times did Christ suffer and die? _____

Hebrews 10:10–12 contrasts the Old Testament priests and their sacrifices with Christ's sacrifice of Himself. Which words describe the number of times Christ had to be sacrificed (v. 10)? _____

By comparison, the priests' work was unending. Which words describe the number of times the priests had to offer sacrifices (v. 11)? _____

Verse 12 concludes by saying that Jesus "offered one sacrifice for sins for all time." What did He do to signify that He was finished? _____

Note: Priests never sat down during their ministry in the holy place... because they were never finished. Christ—"the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2)—did.

3. **The change of substance error.**

A final error regarding the Lord's Table is the belief that the bread and juice actually become the body of Christ, rather than merely symbolizing it. According to this teaching, the worshipper actually is eating and drinking Christ!

The two variations of this error are called *transubstantiation* (the bread and juice *become* Christ's body and blood) and *consubstantiation* (Christ is spiritually present in the bread and juice). Either way, the error is the same.

This error stems from a misinterpretation of Scripture and is easily refuted. It arises from a basic misunderstanding of the use of symbolism in Scripture. Christ often used a physical symbol to represent a spiritual truth. We must not confuse the two. The difference is easy to distinguish.

Doors and Foxes

Did Christ say that the bread was His body and the juice His blood? Yes! He also called Himself a door (**John 10:7**) and a light (**John 8:12**). Both are obviously physical symbols of spiritual truths. Similarly, Christ called Herod a fox in **Luke 13:32**. We could take this literally, but it would be hard to explain. Picture Herod with a bushy tail and sharp teeth! Instead, Christ's reference to Herod as a fox is an obvious figure of speech, meaning that Herod was sly and vicious.

The same interpretative principles must be used when understanding Christ's statement that the bread is His body and the juice His blood. No, we are not eating and drinking His flesh and blood. Rather, we are carrying out the symbolic act which He instituted when He spoke figuratively of the elements which would "show His death" (**1 Corinthians 11:26**) and serve as a "remembrance" of Him (**Luke 22:19**).

It is essential that your understanding of baptism and communion be Bible-based. Both ordinances are done in remembrance of the Lord's death on the cross, and both follow salvation.

Neither earns you special favor with God, but both are done in obedience to Him.

Scripture Memory

Matthew 28:19–20

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

1 Corinthians 11:26

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

Check Your Progress

What are the three most significant lessons that you have learned in this Bible study? Why are they important?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Answer the following questions to measure your understanding of the church ordinances:

1. What won't baptism accomplish? (p. 56–57) _____

2. What are the biblical reasons for being baptized?
(p. 58–59) _____

3. Distinguish water baptism from spiritual baptism.
(p. 59) _____

4. What is the prerequisite for baptism? (p. 61)

5. Why is infant baptism unbiblical? (p. 62) _____

6. What is the purpose of communion? What do the
bread and juice represent? (p. 65–67) _____

7. What is involved in partaking of the Lord's Table
in a worthy manner? (p. 68–69) _____

8. About what should you be thinking during the
communion service? (p. 69) _____

9. Check off the following verses only when you can say them from memory:

Matthew 28:19–20 1 Corinthians 11:26

Do you believe that you know this material well enough to teach it to someone else? _____ If not, review it until you do!