

The Ordinances of the Church

“Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle” (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us” (2 Thessalonians 3:6).

Our Lord ordained two ordinances for the individual Christian to participate in. These are Christian water baptism by immersion and the commemoration of the Lord’s Supper, often called Holy Communion. These are the ONLY traditions given to the Church by our Lord. Other than these, we are warned against developing traditions in our worship of God (Matthew 15:1–6; Colossians 2:8; 1 Peter 1:18–19).

Over time, traditions become so deeply entrenched that they become more important to us than true worship. Traditions can lead to idolatry and apostasy when they become an end in themselves rather than a means to worship God. We will see in this lesson how that has happened in many instances even with the God ordained traditions of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Note: In the first two sections of this lesson, the term ‘baptism’ refers to water baptism.

I. **Baptism: What It Is**

Christian baptism is the first act that God has assigned to a new Christian. This allows the believer to publicly show his or her loyalty and submission to the will of God. While it is true that you cannot lose your salvation by refusing baptism, it nevertheless appears from the scriptures that God does not consider it an option. It is a requirement for growth in the faith.

A. **Baptism is an open profession of faith**

Baptism provides a believer with an opportunity to openly and publicly identify himself or herself as a child of God and a follower of Jesus Christ.

B. **Baptism is an act of obedience**

“Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him” (Matthew 3:13-15).

Jesus was baptized even though He was God in the flesh. He pointed out that it was the proper thing to do in order to fulfill all righteousness. It was His first act of obedience to the Father prior to beginning His public ministry.

C. **Baptism is a picture of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ**

“Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

D. Baptism is a picture of our death to sin and our resurrection to the new life

“Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses” (Colossians 2:12–13).

E. Who may be baptized?

“And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Acts 8:36–37).

According to the above passage, a person must be a believer with all his or her heart. This obviously precludes those who are too young to understand what it means to believe with all their heart. The answer then to the above question is that anyone who is able to understand what it means to be born again and in fact has been born again may be baptized. We can carry this one step further and say that all such persons ought to be baptized because it is God’s will for His people.

F. How is baptism to be performed?

Wherever we have a clear example of how something is to be performed in the scriptures, we ought to use it. In the case of baptism we have a couple of them and they both indicate immersion in the water as the proper method of baptism.

“And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:38–39).

The entire story above can be found in Acts 8:26–39. It clearly shows the entire concept of baptism (Matthew 3:16). Therefore, a typical baptism goes like this: The candidate for baptism is usually instructed as to the meaning of the ceremony to be sure he (or she) truly understands what he is doing. The candidate then enters the water with the person who will baptize him. Since this is almost always done in the presence of other believers, the candidate is then asked to publicly verify that he has indeed been born again and, sometimes, to describe the event.. Upon verification, he is then immersed in the water as the baptizer typically quotes from Matthew 28:19, using a phrase such as this: “Based upon your profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, my brother (or sister), I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” The ceremony is often concluded with a congregational “Amen!”

II. Baptism: What It Is Not

A. Water baptism is not a precondition for salvation

Some churches teach this but there is no scripture anywhere that supports this idea. In every instance in the scriptures salvation is the precondition for baptism. See for example Acts 8:36–37.

B. Water baptism is not a means of salvation

Ephesians 2:8–9 clearly states that a person is saved by grace through faith. Salvation is “not of works, lest any man should boast” and baptism is clearly a ‘work’.

C. Water baptism does not wash away our sin

Revelation 1:5 and 7:14 tell us that our sins are washed away, but they are washed away by the blood of Christ rather than the waters of baptism.

III. Problem Verses

There are several verses that, upon casual reading, seem to indicate that the word “not” does not belong in the statements listed in section II. These are a good example of how necessary it is to study the scriptures rather than just casually reading them. The following are the verses that cause most of the problems with regard to an improper view on the function and purposes of baptism. Interpreting these passages incorrectly puts them in direct conflict with other scriptures which is an immediate indication that something is wrong.

A. Mark 1:4 and Luke 3:3

*“John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins”
(Mark 1:4).*

These two verses are essentially the same. They probably are not a major stumbling block, but they help lay the groundwork for understanding more difficult verses. In addition, they could be interpreted as indicating that the water baptism of John brought remission of sins or justification.

This, of course, is impossible since the atonement had not been accomplished at that time. In fact, this water baptism could not be and was not the same as the water baptism practiced by the Church today. The Church did not even exist at that time. John’s baptism was to prepare a repentant heart, whereas the water baptism of the Church today is to show that repentance has led to salvation.

While John did baptize with water, his primary mission was to preach the soon-to-come baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Matthew 3:11–12 explains the situation better.

“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:11–12).

The term baptism simply means immersion. This immersion can be in many things. For example, Matthew 3:11-12 here indicates three different baptisms. In this passage, John the Baptist speaks of baptism with water, the Holy Ghost, and fire. The baptism with water showed repentance, the baptism with the Holy Ghost brings salvation (i.e., the wheat) and the baptism with fire occurs when the damned (i.e., the chaff) are sent to hell.

Some other important passages showing baptism in mediums other than water are 1 Corinthians 12:13 and Galatians 3:27 which speak of “baptism into Christ” and Acts 1:5 and Acts 11:16 which speak of “baptism with the Holy Ghost.” These two phrases describe the same event—salvation, and are thus interchangeable. John’s baptism was strictly preparatory in nature. He convinced the people of their sin and need of a Savior who could offer remission of sins. It is the baptism with the Holy Ghost that brings remission of sins and regeneration.

B. Mark 16:16

“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:16).

This verse offers two possible interpretations: one which accepts the baptism spoken of as that of the Holy Ghost, and the other insisting on water baptism. If the Holy Ghost baptism is accepted, then baptism refers to the moment of salvation and it is self explanatory. A person who does not believe cannot be saved. However, if you say: “but it doesn’t specify which baptism”; the Bible is a wonderful and powerful book, confounding those who take issue with it. Watch!

In the case of water baptism, it must be noted that this verse has two distinctly different phrases. The first phrase makes a statement and then the second phrase clarifies it. The first phrase talks of believing and being baptized whereas the second, which gives the conditions under which a person is not saved, clearly indicates that it is the condition of unbelief upon which a person is damned. It does not say that a person who is not water baptized is damned.

C. Acts 2:38

*“Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost”
(Acts 2:38).*

This one is a little more difficult because it definitely says that remission of sins comes from baptism. The context of the entire passage must be examined in order to see what is actually being said here. In addition, you must bear in mind that, as we have seen, the term baptism does not always indicate immersion in water.

Bearing this in mind we can now look at Acts 2:38 in the light of the entire passage of Acts 2:1-41:

Acts 2:1-4 establishes the context as involving the baptizing and subsequent filling of the apostles with the Holy Ghost. We can see from these verses that the house was filled with a sound like a rushing wind and cloven tongues similar to fire sat upon each of them. This is a special case where many were baptized at the same time in a spectacular way so that they could better understand what was happening. It was, after all, the first time anybody was ever baptized with the Holy Ghost. The key here is found later in Acts 11:15-16 where the same event is specifically referenced as being “baptized with the Holy Ghost.” Jesus had also prophesied this event in Acts 1:5, calling it baptism “with the Holy Ghost,” and emphatically distinguishing between this and water baptism. Thus the context is established as being baptized with the Holy Ghost rather than with water.

Acts 2:5-13 describes the results of this baptism and subsequent filling with the Holy Ghost.

Acts 2:14-36 explains the process and purpose of being baptized with the Holy Ghost. It explains that it was made possible by the redemption obtained by Jesus Christ through His substitutionary death on the cross. A key verse is verse 21 which says that it was prophesied that a new method for obtaining salvation would be offered in which calling upon the name of the Lord would be the primary requirement.

“And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21).

Acts 2:37 records the question that we all must ask in order to learn how to be saved.

“Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37).

Acts 2:38–40 answers the question when the apostle Peter tells them they need the same thing that the apostles had just experienced, the baptism and filling with the Holy Ghost. He tells them to “repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27), “for the remission of sins”. This, not water baptism, is the baptism spoken of here. The term ‘baptized for the remission of sins’ ties this passage to the baptism of the Holy Ghost as seen in point A above. This is the baptism that all believers receive at the moment of salvation.

Acts 2:41 then speaks of a follow up baptism that those who received the baptism with the Holy Ghost submitted to. This is the water baptism for believers that this lesson is earnestly advocating.

D. Acts 22:16

“And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16).

As above, this passage only requires clarification if water baptism is insisted upon. These are the instructions that Ananias gave to Paul (stilled called Saul at that time) following his conversion as chronicled in Acts 9:1–20. According to that passage, Paul had already acknowledged Jesus as Lord and had accepted Him as his Savior. That is why Ananias could address him as “brother,” a term reserved for fellow Christians. The order of events in that passage is very important to consider. In Acts 9:17, Ananias laid his hands on Paul and told him (1) to receive his sight and (2) to be filled, with the Holy Ghost. As we have already established, salvation, or baptism with the Holy Ghost, must precede the filling with the Holy Ghost.

“And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost” (Acts 9:17).

Immediately after his salvation and subsequent filling with the Holy Ghost, Paul (3) arose and received water baptism as recorded in Acts 9:18. Following this, Paul (4) spent time with the disciples at Damascus, no doubt being disciplined. Being thus properly prepared through salvation, baptism, and discipleship, Paul (5) began to preach Christ in the synagogues according to Acts 9:20.

“And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized. And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus. And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God” (Acts 9:18–20).

Acts 22:16 actually is a restatement of two instructions that Ananias had given him. The first was “arise, and be baptized” and the second, referring back to Acts 2:21 as mentioned in point C above, was to “wash away thy sins” by “calling on the name of the Lord.” They are separate and distinct statements, but are tied together by being in the same verse. As we have seen, Acts 9:1–20 gives a precise order of events for this episode. It proves that salvation came first, and then water baptism followed.

Assuming water baptism is the required interpretation, the order of these statements is reversed from what one would normally expect. However, there are other such oddities found occasionally in the scriptures which some believe exist to test our faith in, and resolve to understand, the scriptures. This may be considered an example of scriptures that are spiritually discerned as in 1 Corinthians 2:14.

IV. The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is a ceremony that should help us remember that our Savior was crucified and shed His blood for us. It is a solemn time of self examination when we review our lives to see if we are attempting to live lives worthy of so great a sacrifice.

A. How is the ceremony performed?

“For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup” (1 Corinthians 11:23–28).

The ceremony is performed much like the description in the above verses. Normally, unleavened bread in the form Matzah crackers or something similar is used. The bread is often broken into small pieces to remind us that Jesus' body was broken for us on the cross. Each participant takes a piece of the bread and waits until it has been distributed to all the participants. The pastor or leader then reads a scripture passage describing the event and a prayer of praise and thanksgiving is offered to God, following which the bread is eaten.

The procedure is much the same for the cup. The cup is usually filled with grape juice or some other red colored drink to recall the blood of God that was shed for our salvation on the cross of Calvary. When the juice has been consumed, the ceremony is typically concluded with a prayer of gratitude for the great sacrifice our Savior made on our behalf.

This beautiful ceremony, done properly, leaves the participants in a very sober and reverent state. There is usually a sense of a renewal of our close relationship with our Savior and a desire to serve Him in a more whole hearted and meaningful way.

B. Who may partake of the Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper is a commemoration of what our Savior did to procure our salvation. Therefore it is meaningless to an unsaved person. It is for believers only, and furthermore, it is for believers whose lives are clean. It is for those who are not careless about their relationship with their Lord.

C. Partaking of the Lord's Supper unworthily

First Corinthians 11:26–30 makes a strong statement about partaking of the elements of the Lord's Supper unworthily. It says that those who do so are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. It says that these people eat and drink damnation to themselves and that "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep [have died!]" (1 Corinthians 11:30).

Because of this verse, many people have come to fear the commemoration of the Lord's Supper. But this is an entirely unwarranted attitude in most cases. All Christians sin after they are saved and some sin frequently. This is the time to recall your weakness and commit it to your heavenly Father. Ask Him to forgive you and help you clean up your act right then and there. Partaking in the ceremony will often give you greater resolve to deal with your sin problems more diligently. However, there are circumstances under which it would be very unwise to partake of the elements.

A Christian living in open, unconfessed sin, with no intention of changing the situation, has no business partaking of the elements. This is the type of Christian that is being warned in this verse. A person in this condition is already under God's chastisement and is, in effect, mocking God. Common sense tells us what a dangerous situation that creates. If this does not describe your situation, then you ought to gladly partake of the special communion with God that this ceremony offers.

D. Why partake at all?

We partake of the Lord's table for several reasons. We partake because our Savior has asked us to. We partake because it causes us to examine our lives and set straight any faults or sin that might be creeping in. One important reason we partake is so that we will remember that we have been bought with a price and our lives are no longer entirely our own. We are the entrusted caretakers of lives that belong to God and therefore we should glorify Him with our lives (1 Corinthians 6:20).

V. Four Views on Communion

There are four commonly held views on the elements partaken of in the commemoration of the Lord's Supper. In many churches this ceremony is called Holy Communion or the Eucharist and the elements are accorded differing degrees of association with the actual flesh and blood of our Lord.

A. Transubstantiation

This view is the official position of the Roman Catholic Church. It claims that, after they have been consecrated by the priest, the elements become the actual body and blood together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Catholic Church takes a very strong stand on this issue, anathematizing any who say that Christ's body and blood are there in sign and figure only. To support this view from scripture, the church points to John 6:48–57 which indeed seems at first glance to say that Jesus commanded His followers to eat His flesh and drink His blood. However, it is never recorded in scriptures that any of His followers ever ate His flesh or drank His blood. Further, if you continue to read the passage, Jesus explains His statements thusly: "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life (John 6:63). It is obvious from this verse that Jesus spoke in a figurative sense in the earlier part of the chapter.

Another problem with this view is that God strictly prohibits the eating of blood both in the Old Testament and in the New (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17; Acts 15:19–29). It is ludicrous to contend that God would ever ask us to break His commandments.

Perhaps the biggest problem that this view faces is just plain common sense. The consecrated wafer doesn't look like flesh, feel like flesh, or taste like flesh. It fails every test for flesh that we can give it. It just is not flesh. Likewise the consecrated wine has no resemblance to blood other than color.

B. Consubstantiation

This is the view taken by the Lutheran Church. It is the Lutheran view that the body and blood of Christ are mysteriously and supernaturally united with the bread and wine, so that they are received when the elements are eaten. This is merely a moderation of the Roman Catholic view and it faces the same problems and challenges that the transubstantiation view faces. They are essentially the same.

C. Spiritual presence

This is the predominant Protestant view. It acknowledges that the previous two views have major problems and attempts to rectify them by softening the language. It still faces the same problems as mentioned above. According to this view, the body and blood of Christ are eaten in a mysterious and spiritual way. By faith the elements give the same benefits as the actual body and blood of the Lord.

D. Symbolic only

This is primarily a Baptist view. It contends that the elements merely commemorate the sacrificial work of Christ, and their value to the participant consists only in the bestowal of a blessing. This view faces none of the problems above and allows for proper exegesis of the passage in John chapter 6. This is the view that we at Little Red Book ministry believe to be the proper one. We believe that God is consistent in His dealings with men. This view is manifestly supported by the volume of scripture on the subject. See Matthew 26:20–29; Mark 14:17–25; Luke 22:14–20; 1 Corinthians 11:24–25.

“And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19).

Reactions

Important: Return this page to the address below to receive your next lesson.

- 1. What is the difference between water baptism and baptism with the Holy Ghost?**
- 2. In your opinion, how necessary is water baptism for a Christian?**
- 3. What do you think is the major reason for differing views on baptism?**
- 4. Why do you suppose that many people fear the Lord's Table unnecessarily?**

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