**Introduction**

Why are the ordinances important—that is, baptism and the Lord’s supper? Because they visibly mark out the community of the local church.

One way to describe the problems of the modern evangelical church is that we’ve forgotten the importance of seeing.

* One the one hand, some churches have become too attraction-focused. They do anything to draw a crowd so that once people come they can hear the gospel. But a desire for people to hear has resulted in community that’s not worth seeing.

* On the other hand, some churches believe that because they preach the word correctly, they’ve done all that matters. Maybe through legalistic or conformist impulses, their community has lost the vibrancy we see in Scripture. So the glory of what we hear from the pulpit isn’t reflected in the congregation that’s assembled around that preaching.

That partnership between hearing and seeing is critical as we come to the idea of the ordinances, because they are what mark out the community of the local church—which is (as Mark Dever’s book puts it) the gospel made visible. Many historians point out that even more than being a debate about justification with some implications for the Lord’s Supper and baptism, the Reformation was a debate over the ordinances—with some implications for justification. Today, these ordinances seem so peripheral to the church, that might seem strange. I hope that by the end of the class, we have more understanding of why people were willing to die over these truths.

**What are the ordinances?**

The “ordinances” refer to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Exactly what are they?

*Baptism* is defined in our statement of faith: “We believe that Christian Baptism is the immersion in water of a believer, into the name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost; to show forth in a solemn and beautiful emblem, our faith in the crucified, buried, and risen Savior, with its effect, in our death to sin and resurrection to a new life.” You hear echoes of Romans 6:3-4, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Baptism doesn’t save; it is a “solemn and beautiful emblem” of our faith that saves by God’s grace. It is a picture of our death, burial, and resurrection in Christ.

Our statement of faith also describes the Lord’s Supper: “the members of the church by the sacred use of bread and wine, are to commemorate together the dying love of Christ; preceded always by solemn self-examination.” We call it the Lord’s Supper; Christians have also called it communion (from the Latin *communion*, sharing in common, because of our sharing with Christ and with each other) and the Eucharist (from the Greek word “*eucharistia*” for “thanksgiving” because Jesus took the bread and “gave thanks” before he broke it. Some Christians call it simply “breaking of bread.” It has its precursors in the Passover meal of the Old Testament, and even earlier than that, when the priest Melchizedek brought out bread and wine for Abram as “priest of God Most High” (Genesis 14:18). Our statement of faith adds that phrase, “preceded always by solemn self-examination” because of Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:28, “Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”

Ever since the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s, Reformed Christians have talked about the ordinances—or some use the term sacraments—as being both “sign” and “seal” of the covenant. As “signs” they are an outward indication of an inward reality. The inward reality of our faith. And the sign is very powerful. To quote Westminster, “There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.” We know that from reading the book of Acts. So in Acts 2, Peter doesn’t tell the crowd at Pentecost, “repent and believe” but “repent and be baptized.” It’s not that baptism saves; that would be faith. But baptism is so closely bound up with faith that sometimes it’s used as a synonym for faith.

And then as “seals” the ordinances verify the promises God gives us in the gospel. Here’s how John Calvin put it it:

The sacraments bring the clearest promises; and they have this characteristic over and above the word because they represent them for us as painted in a picture from life[[1]](#footnote-2).

Going back to Westminster, the Westminster Confession states four purposes for the ordinances in Scripture:

1. They represent Christ and his benefits to us. And, as Calvin just reminded us, they do that in a uniquely visual and physical way.
2. They confirm our interest in him. They remind us that Christ has indeed died and rose again for the forgiveness of our sins.
3. They visibly mark out the church from the world. That is, when you sit and watch the Lord’s Supper for example, you’re seeing a snapshot of, as best we can know, the true church.
4. They engage us in service to God in Christ, according to his Word. Which is one reason we renew our Covenant together before we take the Lord’s Supper as a church.

For the rest of our time, we’ll work through first Baptism and then the Lord’s Supper, mainly answering the question of why they matter. **Any questions so far?**

**Why does Baptism matter?**

*Let’s say that I become a Christian. But I’m never baptized. I can still go to heaven, right? So what harm is done as a result of that omission?*

[Answers: I’m disobeying Christ which dishonors him; I miss out on an opportunity to proclaim him publicly; I miss out on the confirmation of a local church agreeing that my profession seems genuine; I lose a visual reminder of my death to self and life in Christ; other people lose out on that reminder of their own salvation; non-Christians miss out on a visual depiction of the gospel, etc.]

*Now, presumably an understanding of those benefits should inform how we do baptism as a church. How have you seen baptism practiced and dealt with in ways that subvert these purposes? For the moment, let’s leave aside the question of infant baptism and just think about baptism of believers.*

[Answers: churches don’t require baptism for membership: they’re saying obedience is an optional part of following Jesus; churches do baptism *en masse*: they make it less of a testimony of what God has done; it’s not done in connection with a church: whose to say what it means?; it’s not explained: the visual sign isn’t translated for us]

**Who should be baptized?**

Now, you’ll notice that that entire discussion we just had assumes that Baptism is only for *believers*. But, of course, this is something that’s been debated for hundreds of years, and we work closely with churches who disagree on this with us. So why would we believe that baptism is only for believers? Well, we could talk about this for weeks. But let me give a brief summary of the argument.

*Argument for Infant Baptism*

To start out with, we need to understand the argument on the other side of this debate. Some Baptists are surprised—and unprepared—for how good an argument it is. And it never does us any good to argue with a straw man that no one really believes. Now, most people alive today who baptize their babies do so because they believe that baptism removes original sin. Because they’re Roman Catholics. And they don’t believe in salvation by faith alone. I’m not going to deal with them right now. Instead, I want to deal with those who agree with us on the gospel—like evangelical Presbyterians and Anglicans—yet who still baptize infants. To use a technical term, who is a “paedobaptist.”

In short, the argument is that baptism is the New Covenant continuation of the sign and seal of circumcision. A paedobaptist will point out that in the Old Testament, God intended children to be part of the covenant he made with Israel, and the sign and seal of that covenant was circumcision. Circumcision wasn’t only for infants, but it was mainly applied to infants. And this rite was so important that the Lord says to Moses in Exodus 12 that no uncircumcised male should participate in Passover.

So when we get to the New Testament, the strong presumption is that children will continue to be included in the covenant—unless we get clear teaching to the contrary. But now, the sign and seal of the covenant is baptism, not circumcision. So now it applies to all children, not just baby boys. Not surprising then, in Acts 2 when Peter proclaims “Repent and be baptized” as I read earlier, he follows with “For the promise is for you and for your children.” Case closed.

*Argument for Believer-Only Baptism*

So what does a Baptist say to that? Well, let me summarize in a few points. And I should mention that the controversy here isn’t whether believers should be baptized. Virtually no person on earth who calls themselves Christian would disagree with that. It’s whether believers *alone* should be baptized.

Let me give you a few statements about this question.

1. When the New Testament describes what baptism depicts, it describes new life in Christ. So take those verses from Romans 6 I just mentioned. We are raised to newness of life, it says. The assumption is that the person being baptized has been changed. They’ve been regenerated.

1. When the New Testament parallels baptism and circumcision, it parallels baptism not with the Old covenant circumcision of the flesh, but with circumcision of the heart. By way of context, it’s useful to remember that through the Old Testament, God periodically reminds his people that what he’s most interested in is not circumcision of the flesh but circumcision of the heart. So look carefully at Colossians 2 to see where the parallel is.

**11**In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, **12**having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

When someone says “absent any teaching to the contrary, we should continue to consider unsaved infants as members of the covenant, I kind of agree. But Colossians 2 is pretty clear teaching to the contrary, isn’t it? The continuity is not between circumcision and baptism, but between circumcision *of the heart* and baptism. It is between saving faith and baptism.

1. There are no clear examples of infant baptism in the New Testament. In fact, references to baptism talk about conversion. So Peter in Acts 2 that I mentioned, talks about “repenting” and being baptized. To be sure, as he says, this promise *is* for your children: they can repent and be baptized as well! But not baptized without repenting. And, as we read on, the promise isn’t just for our children. It is “for your children and all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” We need to think of our children in the same category of all who are far off, with the desire that the Lord our God should call them to himself.

The only example of baptism in the New Testament that *doesn’t* describe the recipients of baptism hearing the Word or believing is Lydia’s in Acts 16. And as a female, traveling merchant away from home, she is the *least* likely to have had young children with her.

1. There are no known references to infant baptism in the early church—though there are many references to believers’ baptism[[2]](#footnote-3). The first reference we see to infant baptism is Tertullian around AD200 who is actually arguing against it. The first defense of infant baptism we have isn’t until Cyrprian around AD250—and he was arguing for it as something that was salvific[[3]](#footnote-4). Not the argument for infant baptism that we hear today. One would expect that if infant baptism was widespread and if it was not universally accepted (which it clearly wasn’t) then we would see much reference to it in the writings of early church leaders—but we don’t.

*Any questions?*

**What is the Lord’s Supper?**

For the rest of our time, I’d like us to shift our attention to the Lord’s Supper. And a good place to start is with the question “what is it?”

Well, the Lord’s Supper, as we saw earlier, is a meal of bread and wine to commemorate Christ’s death that secured our forgiveness by God. Here’s what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:

23For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when 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 also he took the cup, 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. **27**Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.**28**Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

What we see in 1 Corinthians 11 is that the Lord’s supper has meaning that’s grounded in the past, the present, and in the future.

*The Past*

The Lord’s supper is a remembrance of what Christ did on the cross. That’s what he told us it would be: “do this in remembrance of me.” And that reminder is good for our souls. You may recall that Roman Catholics view the Lord’s supper as a “re-presenting” of Christ’s sacrifice of the cross[[4]](#footnote-5). The bread and wine become the physical body and blood of Jesus in our mouths[[5]](#footnote-6). That’s not what “remembrance” means. Luther taught that there was a “real presence” of Christ in the supper[[6]](#footnote-7). In contrast to that, the Reformed tradition teaches that what we partake of is merely bread and wine. That Christ really is present, but his presence is spiritual and not physical. Thus we talk about “feeding on him in your heart by faith” when we take the Lord’s Supper.

Does belief that the Lord’s Supper is a “mere memorial” of Christ’s death—as Baptists have generally believed[[7]](#footnote-8)—make it unimportant? Certainly not! All through the Bible, God calls his people to remember. That’s what the Passover was, after all: a time to remember God’s salvation of his people. And the salvation we remember in Christ is so much greater even than that. Not salvation from temporal slavery to Egypt, but eternal slavery to sin. If we think of remembrance of a great event in history is important, how much more remembrance of this! Hardly a “mere” memorial.

*The Present*

But the Lord’s supper isn’t simply looking to the past. Paul describes it as saying something about a present reality as well. When we take the supper, it is only after examining ourselves. Examining ourselves to be sure we are in right relationship with God, and right relationship with each other. Beyond that, in verse 29, he says if we eat and drink without “discerning” the body, we eat and drink judgment on ourselves—judgment that apparently had led to the death of some in the Corinthian church. This is no laughing matter! “Discerning the body” is more than simply recognizing what the elements represent. It is a recognition of what the congregational body represents—that together we represent Christ himself, and how we treat each other represents Christ himself.

So the Lord’s Supper shows that at the present I as an individual am walking with the Lord. And it shows that as a body, we are walking in a unity that proclaims truth about who Christ is. It is a snapshot of the heavenly congregation as best we can tell, both in who is participating and in how we relate to each other.

*The Future*

And you probably noticed that future tense in Paul’s teaching: in taking the supper we “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” It is a supper in anticipation of his final coming, a dress-rehearsal, so to speak, of the messianic banquet that is coming. That’s why joyous fits the Lord’s Supper just as well as somber. We are capturing all these emotions in this one token of what Christ has done, is doing, and will do.

**What the Lord’s Supper Does**

If that’s what it is, what does the Lord’s Supper accomplish? In other words, if someone was a Christian but never partook of the Lord’s Supper, what would he be missing?

Here’s a list—hardly exhaustive—of all the ways that God gives us grace through the Lord’s Supper.

* It is a regular opportunity for self-examination. Paul tells us to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith; this is a great time to do that.
* It is a regular opportunity to check our relationships in the church. It’s wonderful to see husbands and wives, or friends, slip out just before the Lord’s supper to reconcile some difference. That’s exactly what Paul has in mind when he tells us to “discern the body” as we eat and drink.
* It is a powerful reminder of our forgiveness. We are seeing something that represents what Jesus did for us so many hundreds of years ago.
* It is a reminder of the passing nature of the physical and the eternal nature of the spiritual. As we eat that bread, we remember that man does not live by bread alone. The Supper is bridging from what is temporary to what is eternal.
* It is a picture of heaven. What an encouragement to look around during the Supper and get a glimpse and a hint of what heaven will be like. So encouraging!
* It is a warning of judgment for those who don’t partake. Perhaps someone’s been disciplined—or “excommunicated.” Or perhaps for pastoral reasons you’ve been advised to not partake. Or perhaps you can’t partake because of unresolved relationships in the church. What could be a hint of heaven becomes a hint of hell. And that is remarkably powerful.
* It is a reminder of what is at stake in our unity as a congregation. Unity isn’t important merely because it makes life in a church more enjoyable. It is important because it pictures Christ. And nowhere do we see that more clearly than the body of Christ assembled around the body of Christ.
* And I’m sure there’s significance we just don’t understand! Jesus took this remarkably seriously; it was one of the last acts of his earthly ministry. And Paul took it seriously as well. We may arrive in heaven someday to discover that it is a means of grace in ways we never comprehended here on earth.

So take note of some of these to think through next time you take of the Lord’s Supper. Which of these have you overlooked? Which have you undervalued? Let’s work together to make this Supper what Christ intends for us.

**Discussion**

OK. With all that said, and with the other classes as backdrop, let’s talk about something that can be a particularly thorny issue in Baptist churches: the membership of believers who believe in infant baptism. Our statement of faith is written to exclude those people from membership. Which means that we are excluding from this bit of God’s family people who will no doubt join us in heaven. Why is that an allowable and right thing to do?

1. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.15.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Didache (AD 100-110), Epistle of Barnabas (AD 120-130), Shepherd of Hamas (AD 150) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Perhaps Irenaeus described infant baptism in AD180—but most likely that’s not what he was writing about (Jewett p. 26). “By the Council of Carthage in 418, anyone who taught against infant baptism was anathematized. In the sixth century the emperor Justinian made infant baptism mandatory throughout the Roman Empire. (Dever: the Church, page 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. RCC Catechism, 1366. In 1367: the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. “Transubstantiation” was confirmed at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Basic idea is an Aristotilian concept that the “substance” can be one thing and the “accidents” (or outward form) can be another. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. “Consubstantiation” teaches that the body and blood of Christ join with the elements in the Eucharist. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Many historians draw a distinction between the “Spiritual Presence” idea of Calvin and Westminster” and the “Memorial” idea of Zwingli and most Baptists. The two are very close, and any difference is no doubt wrapped up in exactly how two proponents of the two views describe their understanding. For the sake of time, I’ve lumped the two into one basic category: the “Reformed” tradition. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)