

Tell Me About
**THE
ORDINANCES**



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I grew up participating in certain observances I did not understand. Reunions, anniversaries, birthdays, and other cultural customs developed out of the rural community in which we lived. I shared these activities without really knowing what they meant. I did not consider them to be burdensome duties, however. It was a privilege to follow the example of my parents. I did these things because I was a member of the Newell family.

After I was born again into the family of God, I began to participate in certain observances that are unique to my spiritual family. Known as *ordinances*, they are symbols of spiritual truth. Each ordinance enables me to remember that I am a member of the family of Christ. Each ordinance deeply influences my thinking—reminding me of our common Christian past, strengthening me for the present, and inspiring me for the future.

Knowing our human tendency to forget the basis of our relationships, Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). All of the ordinances share this characteristic. They were not established by the church but by the Head of the church, Jesus Christ. In the Great Commission, he called us to observe the ordinances (Matt 28:19–20). The practice of these universal symbols helps us to recognize our oneness in Christ.

The church universal practices two ordinances: baptism and Communion. In addition, some Christian groups practice the ordinance of feet washing, which reenacts the servant example that Christ established during the Passover meal (John 13:1–17).

BAPTISM

(Matt 3:13–17; 28:19; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22)

Scripture instructs us to believe in Jesus Christ and be baptized. One may be baptized without believing, but when one believes in Christ, she or he naturally desires to follow the example of our Lord in baptism. Water baptism testifies to the personal experience of the believer—being cleansed *from* and dying *to* sin. It represents how our sins are washed away through the blood of Christ (Rev 1:5; 1 Pet 1:18–19). It demonstrates that we have died to sin and have been resurrected to new life in Christ. “We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

Since it is a clear symbol of being buried and resurrected, immersion in water is the scriptural mode of baptism. When Jesus was baptized by John, he “came up *out of* the water” (Matt 3:13–17 LB, emphasis added). After Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, “they came up *out of* the water.” (Acts 8:39 LB, emphasis added) Some Christian groups baptize by sprinkling or pouring, for the sake of convenience. However,

strict imitation of the example of Christ calls for baptism by immersion.

The practice of infant baptism is not found in Scripture. True, Jesus did take little children up in his arms and blessed them (Matt 19:13–15), but it is pure speculation to suppose this refers to the baptism of infants.

Obedience, both to the written Word of God and the example of Christ, calls us to be baptized. Some Christians, like my own father, were baptized as infants and desire to be baptized by immersion after they have made a personal decision for Christ. They see it as a public declaration of the change in their lives. It was an honor for me to baptize my father after he was sixty years old. That baptism did not make him any more Christian, but it did clearly depict that he had died to sin and was now resurrected in Christ.

COMMUNION

(Matt 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20)

Jesus used a meal to institute one of the most universal and unforgettable ordinances of the church. Communion (sometimes referred to as the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist) is based on the Passover, a ritual meal in which Jewish people eat a lamb, which reminds them of the lamb sacrificed so that they could be delivered from Egyptian bondage (Ex 12:1–13).

While observing the last Passover meal prior to his crucifixion, Jesus used the broken bread and the full cup as symbols of his life,

which would soon be sacrificed for his followers. Through the breaking of the bread, his disciples saw Christ's brokenness and suffering. Drinking from the cup, they realized that his blood was being shed for their sins. Little wonder that some call this the Eucharist (the cup of blessing). Truly, in taking Communion we unite in giving thanks to God.

Communion expresses our unity in Christ. Through his brokenness, we have become one. Through his death, we have received life. As the family of God, made up of believers of all faiths and races, tribes and tongues, we unite in obedience to the teaching of Christ: "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:25–26). This ritual helps us to remember the price that was paid and the forgiveness we have experienced. Some Christians partake of Communion each week. Others observe it once each quarter or at other significant celebrations in the church year.

Communion reminds us that we cannot save ourselves. Therefore, when Communion is served, it is a good time to examine ourselves (1 Cor 11:28) and make certain that we are able to give thanks for this great salvation.

FEET WASHING

(John 13:1–17)

This ordinance has been practiced by the church since it was first instituted by Christ. While not observed by all Christians, the ordinance is significant. The command

of Christ in John 13 is accentuated by strong words: “you also *ought* to wash one another’s feet” and “you also should do as I have done to you” (vv. 14, 15).

Feet washing speaks to a basic human problem: pride. The disciples had been arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom (Luke 22:24–27). Although they had heard Christ’s teaching on that occasion, he now wanted to give them an unforgettable example. Rising from the table, he took a towel and basin, and then knelt before each disciple to wash their feet. He then asked, “Do you know what I have done to you?” (John 13:12). Jesus had broken their preconceived ideas of greatness by humbling himself and doing the work of a servant.

Washing someone else’s feet requires a willingness to lay aside our pride of position, popularity, or power. We must humble ourselves to become servants (Phil 2:5–8). To follow Christ’s example of humility is the path to true happiness. “If you know these things, you are *blessed* if you do them” (John 13:17, emphasis added).

Usually observed on Maundy Thursday (the day before Good Friday), this ordinance also can be observed at any season of the year. Conducted in an atmosphere of dignity, it challenges the participants to rise and serve the needs of others. “Just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me” (Matt 25:40).

The ordinances of the church will always be questioned by our children and by new believers in the household of faith. They wonder, What is the purpose of these rituals? What is their significance? Then, like the Jews of old, we should let them know what God has done for us and what he expects from us. (See Josh 4:21–24.)

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