

INTRODUCTION

Due to some conversations I have had with individuals over the past few months, and due to some simple observations I have made over the past few years, I have come to realize that among the church, the ordinances of the gospel have appeared to become less and less important; even to the point that they are viewed as optional. As a pastor, this greatly concerns me. I have even talked with several pastors and leaders among our denomination about this issue. Many (not all) agree that they too have seen a lack of interest among believers toward the ordinances (and not just the Washing of the Saints' Feet). Whatever the reason(s) might be, there appears to be a disinterest and a lack of participation in the very gospel ordinances Christ Himself established, exemplified, and also commanded of the Church.

Secondly, it also concerns me that when we *do* practice the ordinances of the gospel, some have absolutely no clue as to why. One pastor I recently talked with believes that one of the reasons the gospel ordinances are downplayed among believers is because the ordinances aren't being taught from the pulpit. What an indictment!

I'm a firm believer in explaining the meaning of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Washing of the Saints' Feet. I love sitting down with baptismal candidates (including children) and explaining the meaning of baptism. It remains my duty and responsibility to teach and preach on the ordinances of the gospel, their importance, and our need to faithfully observe them.

The tragedy is that pragmatism and cultural relativism have so infiltrated the church, that the very things Christ Himself instituted have been regarded as outdated and irrelevant. It's almost as if, "anything goes." In some "Christian" circles, the ordinances are viewed simply as a cultural practice of the early church and no longer relevant in the modern-day church. I could go on, but I think you get the message.

While here on earth, Jesus established three gospel ordinances:

Baptism
The Lord's Supper
Feet Washing

Not only were each of these exemplified by the Lord Himself, but also commanded of the Church. The ordinances of the gospel are not optional for the believer because they have clearly been commanded by Jesus Christ. It stands to reason that the definite desire of any true believer would be to obey Christ. Jesus said, "If you love Me, [you will] keep My commandments" (John 14:15). Jesus asked a very valid question found in Luke 6:46. "But why do you call ye Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?"

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A SACRAMENT AND AN ORDINANCE

A SACRAMENT

A sacrament is a religious rite that is performed (i.e., Baptism & Communion) *as a means of grace or salvation*. For example, the Roman Catholic Church has seven such sacraments.

1. Baptism (includes infant baptism)
2. Confirmation
3. Communion (believing the wafer and wine become the literal body and blood of Christ; this is called transubstantiation)
4. Penance
5. Holy orders (Ordination)
6. Marriage
7. The anointing of the sick

But the Scriptures are clear that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone; plus nothing; minus nothing. And in regards to infant baptism, a group rose up in Switzerland about 1525 and said, “Baptism is only for people who consciously put their faith in Jesus Christ. Infant baptism means nothing in God’s eyes.” This group faithfully preached the gospel. And those who came to personally know Christ, although having been baptized as an infant, were then re-baptized as believers. That’s how this group came to be known historically as Anabaptists; *ana* meaning “again.” Both Catholic and Protestant churches persecuted them severely.

Baptism is only for those who have consciously and personally trusted Christ as Savior and Lord of their lives. Therefore, it is called “believer’s baptism.”

AN ORDINANCE

A gospel ordinance is an outward rite appointed by Christ as a visible sign of *having already received grace or salvation*; this brings us to our next point:

WRONG VIEWS OF BAPTISM

THINKING IT CAN SAVE

Just as there is no saving virtue in the bread and the juice at Communion (they are merely symbols that represent the entire atoning work of Christ), there is also no saving virtue in the water during baptism. Peter writes:

There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 3:21).

Just as Noah and his family were saved from the judgment of a worldwide flood by means of the ark (v. 20), so the believing sinner is saved from God's final judgment upon the world because of their spiritual union into Christ as their ark of safety (v. 21b), which water baptism symbolizes. The believer's baptism is a public, visible, and outward expression to the world of his agreement to what God has already done in his heart.

Upon hearing Philip's explanation of Isaiah 53, the Ethiopian asked, "What hinders me from being baptized?" Philip responded by saying to him, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And the Ethiopian answered him and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." "So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him" (Acts 8:36-38).

In 1 Corinthians 1:14-16 Paul wrote,

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other.

Why didn't Paul make it a point to baptize every believer, if salvation were only acquired through baptism? Because Paul knew and taught that salvation was solely through faith in Jesus Christ.

THINKING IT IS OPTIONAL

Just in case we have forgotten, let's read Matthew 28:18-20 one more time:

And Jesus came and spoke to them saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore [in response to His Lordship] and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The Great Commission is in the form of a command that can only be obeyed by "going," "making disciples," "baptizing," and "teaching." Now tell me, where is the option in that? Jesus does not indicate that any part of the Great Commission is optional or cultural.

One of the first acts of obedience for all believers is to identify with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection through water baptism. It is a public testimony to our friends, family, and church family that we have agreed with God concerning our old life dominated by sin; that we have turned from, and forsaken that sin; and by faith we have turned in total commitment to Christ. New converts therefore should be instructed and encouraged to be baptized as soon as possible. And what an opportunity for unsaved friends and family to hear and see the message and the meaning behind the believer's baptism! That's why I always try to send out as many invitations as possible to family and friends, inviting them to the baptismal service.

And church, it remains our mandate to "go," "make disciples," "baptize," and "teach." The world is not commissioned to come to us; we are commissioned to go to the world. Not only are we the product of God's purpose (redemption of a lost world), we are also the means of achieving it! God redeems people for the purpose of using them to redeem other people. And because we have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, He has given us the ministry of reconciliation. Just as baptism is not optional for the new believer, the Great Commission (in its entirety) is not optional for us.

CONCLUSION

I'm not first asking if you have been baptized. I'm first asking if you have personally trusted Christ, and Christ alone as Savior and Lord of *your* life? Have you agreed with God concerning your sin? Have you turned from your sin (your old way of life), forsaken your sin, and by faith turned in total commitment to Christ? Pastor Robert Mead used to say, "You can be baptized in Buck Creek until all the tadpoles know you by name; but until you personally know Christ as Savior and Lord of your life, water baptism doesn't mean a thing."

If you have genuinely done so, then have you publicly responded in obedience to Christ through baptism? Again, baptism is one of the very first public and outward expressions to the world as to what God has done in the heart. There is absolutely no such thing as a "secret disciple." In light of our recent series: *Ambassadors for Christ*, there is absolutely no such thing as a "secret" ambassador. Now that's a contradiction!

And church, if we are not regularly going, making disciples, baptizing, and teaching, then we are not truly a biblical New Testament church. We might be a social gathering; we might be some sort of institution; but we are not a New Testament church as described in the Scriptures. Again, just as baptism is not optional for the new convert, the Great Commission (in its entirety) is not optional for us.

He said in 1 Corinthians 1:17a, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.” So Paul never equated baptism with the gospel.

Granted, Paul didn’t want anyone to think he was starting some cult or merely drawing people to himself. But when did Paul ever back down when it came to the gospel of Jesus Christ? If baptism were essential for salvation, then why didn’t Paul go ahead and baptize every believer

We are called to be ambassadors for Christ. So often we're not ambassadors, we're secret agents, and we never blow our cover before the unregenerate world.

Hank Hanegraaff