

## What We Believe – 10. Ordinances (Part 1)

We believe in: *“The ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as being instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism by immersion as an identification with the Lord Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, the only proper subjects for it being those who profess repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord’s Supper as a commemoration of His death, but not being a sacrifice for sin and not involving any change in substance of the bread and the wine.”*

### A) Introduction

The Lord Jesus Christ has given to the church two specific activities, commonly referred to as “Ordinances” or the “Sacraments”; these are: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These are means of grace, good gifts of a generous God to spiritually feed and bless His people. In this first study we shall consider the subject of baptism.

### B) Baptism

#### 1. What is baptism?

The English word “baptise” comes from the Greek βαπτίζω, meaning to immerse or dip. It is used of the ritual cleansing that the Jews performed (e.g. **Mark 7:4**) as well as the Christian practice of baptism. The account of Jesus’ baptism is best understood in terms of Him being immersed within the River Jordan (**Matthew 3:16**).

#### 2. Where does baptism come from?

Neither of the two ordinances are activities randomly assigned to the church, but both find their place within the much broader scope of biblical theology.

The practice of baptism does not feature in the Old Testament (the word is used in the Greek translation of the OT with reference to Naaman’s immersion in the River Jordan, but this indicates the broader

use of the word, not its specific Christian meaning). However, it appears immediately at the beginning of all four gospels in connection with the ministry of John the “Baptist”. Sources outside of the Bible indicate that baptism began during the period between the writing of the Old and New Testaments, initially as a rite for Gentile converts to Judaism. However, by John’s time it was applied more generally “*for repentance*” (Matthew 3:11).

In Scripture there is a general pattern that God creates new life through water. The opening verses of Genesis speak of the primordial waters present at the beginning of creation (Genesis 1:2). On creation days 2 and 3, God separates these waters from each other and from the land so as to create a habitable space for His people (Genesis 1:6-10). The flood in Genesis 6-7 is an act of “decreation”, bringing the chaotic waters back to destroy life. Yet Noah and his family survive, being delivered through water in the ark.

When Moses is born, he is similarly rescued through water in a basket (Hebrew = ark, same as with Noah, Exodus 2:3). Then at the Red Sea, he leads God’s people into new life in covenant with God as they pass through the waters (which then turn and destroy their enemies, Exodus 14). Similarly, after the disobedient generation perishes in the wilderness, Joshua leads the next generation into new life in covenant with God as they pass through the waters of the River Jordan (Joshua 3).

When Jesus appears and receives baptism through John, He is continuing a long-established pattern of God’s people going through water into life in covenant with God. Jesus does this act as our representative. Baptism identifies us with Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4) and also joins us to each other as followers of Jesus (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Ultimately, in the new creation we read that “*the sea was no more*” (Revelation 21:1), and there is no further baptism, since there is no

further need of cleansing or repentance, and no need to identify those belonging to Christ as all will do so.

Baptism therefore symbolises the following:

- A public declaration of repentance from sin and faith towards the Lord Jesus Christ;
- A public expression of union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection;
- A public identification of an individual with the covenant people of God.

### 3. Who is baptism for?

The symbolism identified above indicates that the only suitable candidates for baptism are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Whilst our Presbyterian and Anglican brothers and sisters would practice the baptism of the children of covenant members (citing continuity with the practices in the old covenant), we would not regard infant baptism as true baptism.

### 4. How is baptism to be carried out?

There is no passage that prescribes how a church is to go about baptising candidates. Our approach involves a candidate approaching the elders, who in turn take the application to church members for a vote. This may appear somewhat convoluted, but it seeks to uphold the following principles:

#### *a) The Priority of Baptism*

Baptism is mandated by the Lord Jesus Christ, and the New Testament knows no such thing as a Christian who is content to remain unbaptised. However, **Matthew 28:18-20** is not just aimed at individuals but also at churches. We are concerned, not only with who is being baptised, but also with who is doing the baptising. Whatever process a church uses to baptise candidates, it must reflect the ownership of the whole church.

### *b) The Position in Redemptive History*

To understand the NT's position on baptism as a whole means understanding how Acts fits into God's calendar for redemption. Acts is not a manual for the organisation and practice of local churches. It narrates the infancy of the NT church and contains many unique features (such as the presence of the Apostles). It doesn't ever give us a picture of baptism in the context of an established local church.

### *c) The Privilege of the Local Church*

In **Matthew 18**, Jesus gives to the local church the privilege and responsibility of identifying His people. The task of "binding and loosing" (see **Matthew 18:18**) links the local church with the Apostles' responsibility to exercise the "*keys of the kingdom of heaven*" (**Matthew 16:19**). The church is commanded by Jesus to identify His covenant people, and baptism is a means of doing this.

### *d) The Practice of Membership*

Baptism is the symbol that someone belongs to God's covenant people; membership is the everyday reality of being an active part of God's covenant people. The two therefore belong together, and separating the two introduces different categories of Christian. This is unhealthy, both for individuals and for churches. Since churches are expected to exclude members, it is implied that the church has the task of including members (**Matthew 18:17**).

The above does not imply that there is no other way of baptising, nor that there wouldn't be exceptions, but whatever process a church uses needs to take these principles into account.

## **C) Conclusion**

Baptism is a privilege and responsibility for every Christian and for every local church. It is a means of grace that builds us up, marking us out as the covenant people of God.