



## Observing the Ordinances

### Remembering and Proclaiming the Gospel

#### A Christ Church of Elizabeth Position Paper

What's the difference between a church and a crowd of Christians? Could we call it "church" when we're with a bunch of believers at camp or a Christian conference? What about if you're a member of a small group? Is the youth group or your ministry team sort of a little church all by itself?

Christians throughout history have used two primary marks to identify a true New Testament church:

- 1) right preaching
- 2) right administration of the ordinances

If you think about it, these two marks are very closely related: the ordinances make the results of preaching visible. God always *creates* His people and *sustains* His people *by His word*. Unsaved people are converted by the word of God, *creating* spiritual life (Rom 10:13-17). Saved people are strengthened by the word of God, *sustaining* spiritual life (1 Tim 3:16-17).

But how can we tell if God's word is creating and sustaining spiritual life in our church? The ordinance of baptism helps us to see that God's word is creating spiritual life, and the ordinance of the Lord's Supper helps us see that God's word is sustaining our spiritual life. Baptism signifies the beginning of our fellowship with Jesus, our brand new life in Christ which was brought about by hearing and responding to His word in faith. The Lord's Supper signifies our ongoing fellowship with Jesus, which is sustained by the word.

At Parker Hills, we require all of our members to be baptized, and we offer the Lord's Supper every week in direct connection with the preaching of God's word.

### What are "ordinances"?

The ordinances, also called "sacraments," are *ceremonial signs* which were ordained by Jesus Himself and which point us to the gospel. He gave us two of them: baptism and the Lord's Supper:

**Matthew 28:18-20** *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

**1 Corinthians 11:23-25** *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup> In 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."*

Notice several important contrasts about the ordinances:

- They were given to the church, not to individuals. Practically, this means that they are most appropriately administered in the public gatherings of the church, not privately or in a gathering of random believers. Administering the ordinances outside the oversight of a local church undermines

the corporate nature of the ordinances—being baptized *into the body of Christ* and enjoying *communion with the church*.

- They are enduring and universal, not limited to a certain era or culture. Churches throughout history and around the world might look different in a lot of ways, but they all should practice the ordinances.
- They are signs of our salvation, not sources of our salvation. They point us to something. They remind us and instruct us and make certain spiritual realities visible for us.

What exactly do the ordinances point us to? What are they signs of? Baptism and the Lord's Supper are our God-given signs of the New Covenant. Every covenant has a sign associated with it. For example, God marked His covenant with Noah with a rainbow (Gen 9:12-17). Under God's covenant with Abraham, the sign was circumcision (cf. Gen 17:9-14). The New Covenant is God's arrangement that offers us salvation from sin through faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Jer 31:31-34; Lk 22:20; Hb 8:8-13; Hb 9:15), and its signs are baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism signifies our entrance into the Covenant (becoming a disciple of Jesus). Communion signifies ongoing participation in the Covenant (continual fellowship with Jesus). In short, baptism and the Lord's Supper point us to the gospel:

Never mind that bread and wine, unless you can use them as folks often use their spectacles. What do they use them for? To look at? No, to look *through* them. So, use the bread and wine as a pair of spectacles. Look through them, and do not be satisfied until you can say, "Yes, yes, I can see the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." ~ Charles Spurgeon

## A Closer Look at Baptism

Mark Dever calls baptism "Jesus' altar call." It is His ordained response to the gospel. Are you a Christian? Forget raising your hand or walking down the aisle of the church. Show it by being baptized. More particularly, the Scriptures show that baptism is a burial, a boundary, and a bond.

### 1. A Burial

**Romans 6:3-4** *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> 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 symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus as we have experienced it in our own life, which is one reason our church practices baptism by immersion—the plunge under the water and return aptly picturing death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism demonstrates that we have died to self and our old nature and now we are alive with the new life of Christ in us.

### 2. A Boundary

**Matthew 28:19** *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*

Baptism is only for followers of Jesus. As such, it's a boundary line that marks us off from the world and identifies us as Christians. Baptism is a visible, physical representation of several aspects of Christian conversion:

- our spiritual death, burial and resurrection to new life in Jesus (Rom 6:3-5)
- the Holy Spirit's work of "baptizing" us into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13)
- the washing away of our sins and the cleansing of our conscience (1 Pt 3:21-22)
- the cutting away of our old, dead heart and replacing it with a new, living one (Col 2:11-14)

Thus, this ordinance has no meaning for people who have not trusted Christ for themselves.

That's why we offer baptism only to people who can give a credible demonstration of their own faith—in other words, people who can explain the gospel and affirm their own embrace of it. This practice is called “believer baptism” or “credo baptism,” and it means we don't baptize infants or individuals who can't give a credible profession of their own faith.

However, because Ephesians 4:5 tells us there is “one Lord, one faith, *one baptism*,” our elders are willing to recognize baptisms performed in other Christian churches under circumstances previous to a member candidate's coming to us, provided that baptism was not viewed as regenerative but was:

- Confessional = performed in a church that subscribes to the classic creeds of orthodox Christianity (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, Chalcedonian Creed, Athanasian Creed)
- Symbolic = pointing to realities beyond the rite itself
- Trinitarian = administered in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

Theological traditions differ on the precise mode and meaning of baptism, but a ceremony with less than these three features (above) would seem to us to be something less than Christian baptism. For personal situations where these three criteria apply, a candidate's baptism may be considered by the elders to be acceptable for membership on a case-by-case basis (a practice known within the Baptist theological tradition since at least the 1660s and commonly referred to as “open membership”). To put it most poignantly, we don't want to refuse some to membership in our family whom the Lord has clearly welcomed into His!

### 3. A Bond

**Romans 6:4-5** *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. <sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

It's true that baptism is a demonstration of our commitment to Christ and our promise to follow Him (point 2 above). But baptism is also a demonstration of God's commitment to us—His promise never to forsake us, even in death! Jesus gave us baptism as a reminder that, just like His death wasn't the end of the story, so too we will rise again to live forever. Your baptism is a promise of your future resurrection!

## A Closer Look at the Lord's Supper

Baptism guards the front door of the local church, and the Lord's Supper guards the back. Baptism symbolizes our brand-new relationship with the members of the church, and the Lord's Supper symbolizes our ongoing relationship with them. In practical terms, this means a church member who is under discipline may be barred by the elders from receiving Communion for a set period of time. And members who have been excommunicated are barred until their repentance and restoration are complete.

According to 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, the Lord's Supper is...

- an expression of our unity in the church (vv 18-19; cf. 10:16-17)
- an opportunity to demonstrate our care for each other (vv 20-22, 33)
- a symbolic remembrance of Jesus' atoning sacrifice for us (vv 23-25)
- a proclamation of the gospel and the certainty of Jesus' return (v 26)
- an opportunity for self-examination (vv 27-32)

So what does it mean to “eat and drink in an unworthy manner”?

The best and only worthiness which we can bring to God, is to offer him our own vileness, and, if I may so speak, unworthiness, that his mercy may make us worthy; to despond in ourselves, that we may be consoled in him; to humble ourselves, that we may be elevated by him; to accuse ourselves, that we may be justified by him; to aspire, moreover, to the unity which he recommends in the Supper, and, as he makes us all one in himself, to desire to have all one soul, one heart, one tongue. ~ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

In other words, unworthy participation in the Lord's Supper means we willfully disregard its significance, the things laid out in the five bullet points above. It might mean we are creating disunity in the church, we are careless about other people in our church, we are apathetic about our sin or the death of Christ for us, or we let our minds wander and our desires shift to other things. These are all ways of willfully disregarding the significance of the ceremony we are participating in. In other words, our problem today is often not what we *do*—drunkenness and gluttony, like in Corinth; rather, our problem in this area is what we *don't* do—we don't love strangers, we don't reach out to others beyond our little circle of friends, we don't show respect for and love for and interest in people we don't know very well.

We *strongly suggest* but do not require that only *baptized* believers participate in the Lord's Supper. This order in the symbols—baptism first, then the Supper—corresponds to the order of the realities they symbolize. Baptism signifies the beginning of our relationship with Jesus; the Lord's Supper signifies our ongoing fellowship with Jesus. Furthermore, the Lord's Supper is only for obedient believers, and baptism is a key element of obedience.

### **A Few Additional Particulars**

**MINIMUM AGE:** Our church extends baptism to people only after we have reasonable assurance they have understood and responded positively to the gospel. Sometimes the fruit of conversion is apparent immediately, as when Philip baptized the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-38). At other times, as when a child is reared in a Christian home, that fruit isn't apparent for several years until the individual begins to own the faith as his/her own. Generally, we expect to see the fruit of conversion when professing Christians are in their later high school years, though sometimes it is apparent earlier.

NOTE: The biblical fruit of conversion includes:

- holding fast to the gospel (1 Cor 15:1-2)
- increasing growth in obedience to God's word (1 Jn 2:3-4)
- a love for God's people (1 Jn 4:7-8)
- a commitment to basic Christian doctrine (Col 1:22-23)
- an internal assurance from the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:16)

**CHURCH MEMBERSHIP:** We do require baptism for church membership, but we do not require membership at baptism. Practically, this means we may (rarely!) baptize someone who, for some reason, is not immediately able or ready to join our church.

NOTE: For children reared in our church, we strongly desire them to recognize CCE as their own and not merely their parents' church. Thus, we encourage the minor children of church-member families to serve in certain capacities, participate in worship, and generally act like church members —albeit without the right to vote or the jeopardy of public church discipline. Around age 18, however, we expect our young people to make a decision EITHER to be baptized (if needed) and join the church as full adult members OR to continue attending but strictly as non-members, without the privileges of membership any longer.

### **A Final Word**

The most significant aspect to the ordinances is Who gave them to us and why. Think about it. Jesus gave us specific ways to remember Him, and these ways don't so much involve His birth, His incarnation, His miracles, His power, or His teachings. He instituted the Lord's Supper and baptism precisely to help us remember Him by His death.

And the reverse is also true: if you want to really see the death of Jesus Christ with the eyes of your heart, don't hang a crucifix on your wall or buy a cross necklace to wear. Just enjoy the ordinances.

But remember this, too... We won't always be observing these signs. Some awesome day, perhaps even today or later this week, we'll put them behind us and enjoy the real thing—eternal fellowship with Jesus, face to face and in person!

*<sup>15</sup> And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. <sup>16</sup> For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." <sup>17</sup> And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. <sup>18</sup> For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Lk 22:15-18*