

The “Other” Ordinance

In the context of local church life, an *ordinance* is a sacred command of a ceremonial nature with great symbolic significance. Baptists have traditionally believed in and practice two ordinances – Water Baptism and the Lord’s Table. Most would readily identify the ordinance of Baptism with Baptists, but the reality is that most denominational groups believe in and practice some form of baptism. It does seem appropriate that Baptists would place strong emphasis on baptism and this we most certainly do. However, the ‘other ordinance’ is equally important and serves a very important purpose in church life.

Both Baptism and The Lord’s Table (also called ‘the Lord’s Supper’ or sometimes simply ‘Communion’) are ceremonial. That is to say, they are acts which do not serve a practical purpose, rather they are creative ways of making a statement. On a practical level, the Lord’s Table is as poor a meal as Baptism is a bath! But their power to communicate a message is quite profound. You can think of them as ‘word pictures’ or as ‘dramatic statements’.

Water baptism is the immersion in water of a believer in Christ, upon confession of Christ as Lord and Saviour, as a symbolic statement of belief in the death and resurrection of Christ on our behalf. As such it also represents our own death and resurrection and the new life we have in Him. Water baptism in this way also identifies a person with Christ and with the body of Christ; His church. [For more on Baptism, see “What About Baptism?”]

The Lord’s Table is the regular corporate ceremony consisting of the eating of bread, symbolizing the body of Christ given up to death for the forgiveness of our sins, and the drinking of wine (grape juice normally referred to as ‘the cup’) representing the blood of Jesus shed for the forgiveness of our sins. Both of these elements of the Lord’s Table together simply represent the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ offering Himself in our place to take the punishment for our sins so that we might be forgiven and have new life. The eating and drinking symbolize our receiving Christ by faith in order to receive the merits of the sinless life He lived and benefit from the sacrifice of that life He made upon the cross for us.

Both Baptism and The Lord’s Table picture the death of Christ, with Baptism placing perhaps more emphasis on the resurrection as well. Both identify the believer with Christ and with His sacrifice on our behalf. Both are emblems of our salvation.

The Uniqueness of The Lord’s Table

Perhaps the most significant difference between Baptism and The Lord’s Table is that Baptism is intended to be something for each individual member of the body that happens at the beginning of our Christian life and is not intended to be repeated. Whereas the Lord’s Table is something we are to participate in all together regularly and continually as a local church body. (See 1Cor 11:26)

Though both Baptism and the Lord’s Table are precious, the fact that the Lord instructed us in only one ordinance to be repeated often when we meet as a local church, should cause us to recognize that this is something with great significance for His church. When you think about it, the fact that the Lord chose this ceremony, over every possible thing He could have initiated, demands the question, “What is the

significance of 'The Lord's Table' as an Ordinance of Christ for His church?" The answer to this question needs to be understood and appreciated by every Christian.

The Significance of The Lord's Table

What is the most important thing for Christians to remember? That Christ has won our salvation and that at great personal cost; He died for us, and we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Our faith in Christ includes our faith in what He has done. This precious truth is the foundation for all of Christian faith and practice. It is what we call the gospel. The message of the Lord's Table is the heart and soul of the gospel message and of the church itself.

This is what makes the Lord's Table observance in the life of a local church a time of great significance. It could be said that the Lord's Table is to the local church, what a devotional time is to the individual Christian. It is a time of cleansing; a calling back. It is a time to refocus and to be reminded of the one grand truth; the one great reality of the whole of Christian faith and life - Jesus died for us. The Apostle Peter warns us not to forget about that time in our lives when we received the cleansing from our sin (2Pet 1:5-9). The author of Hebrews encourages us to keep our focus upon Christ who endured the cross for us and won the victory on our behalf (Heb 12:2).

This is not only the number one issue for individual Christians, but it is also the priority for the local church. Our success as a church in being what God wants us to be requires that we maintain this biblical focus. Our relationships with one another are all mediated through Christ who is the only Mediator between us and God. He is our peace, not only with God but with one another. This focus is readily apparent when you consider the context of the Lord's Table instructions given by the apostle Paul in 1Corinthians 11. We cannot observe the Lord's Table and commemorate the Lord's sacrificial death for us, in truth, while showing disregard for one another, for that would be showing disregard for Christ Himself and for His sacrifice.

With that in mind, You can see then why Christ has given us this wonderful memorial ceremony. It is a gift to His church which enables us to keep on track. It is as if Christ were saying, "If you're going to remember only one thing, remember this!" In the Lord's Table observance, the Lord Jesus Himself keeps drawing us back to the one great essential of the gospel and the foundation of the church - the atoning work of Christ; the giving of His life's blood for the forgiveness of our sin and the saving of our souls.

If we are going to be Christians, that is to say 'Christ ones', if we are going to be the church of Christ, then our lives must be centered upon Him and upon what He has done for us and what He has taught us. The Lord's Table observance is the unique way that Christ has chosen to keep this before us. It is the beautiful picture that enables us to remember as a group, who we are, what we are, and why we are here.