

The Church: Rites *and* Rituals



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 28:19, 20; Rom. 6:3–8; John 13:1–17; Matt. 26:26–28; 1 Cor. 11:24–26.*

Memory Text: “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (*Acts 2:38, NKJV*).

Key Thought: God has instituted ordinances that, properly understood, help to reinforce our faith.

Many societies have initiation rituals, sometimes called “rites of passage.” In some cultures, rites of passage are designed in order to help persons to transition from one stage of life into another. For example, rites of adulthood are performed around the onset of puberty. These rites vary from place to place; yet, all have the goal of ensuring that younger members are shaped to be productive and responsible, community-oriented individuals. In the process, boys or girls are taught the ways of adulthood; that is, they are shown what is expected of them as adult members of the society.

In the Christian community there are specific rites as well, acts that formalize the commitment of individuals to the faith that they profess. These sacred acts not only confirm a person's participation and fellowship in the community but, ideally, help to prepare each individual to become a faithful and productive member of that community. These acts also are the means of helping members to understand what their commitment to Christ must entail. This week we'll look at three rites that express our faith: baptism, foot-washing, and the Lord's Supper.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 1.*

Naming the Sacred Rites

During the early stages of the Christian church, believers in the eastern part of the church, where Greek was the common language, used the word *mysterion*, or “mystery,” to describe Christian sacred rites. In the west, where Latin predominated, the term employed was *sacrament* (Latin, *sacramentum*). A *sacramentum* was an oath that a Roman soldier swore, declaring his obedience to the commander’s order. Those who employed this word felt that it described accurately the nature of the sacred rites. With time, however, the idea came to represent an act with an inward invisible power. The church of the Middle Ages identified seven such acts, called “sacraments,” which were seen as means of infusing grace into a person’s soul.

During the Reformation, the sacraments came under scrutiny and criticism. In the minds of many, the term *sacrament* appeared tainted. A different term was felt to be in order, and that was *ordinance*. The word *ordinance* comes from the verb “to ordain,” which makes an ordinance a special act that Christ Himself instituted or ordained. To prefer the term *ordinance* to *sacrament* is to say that one participates in the acts because they are the divinely ordained means for us to show our obedience and loyalty to Jesus as Lord. Seventh-day Adventists see baptism, foot-washing, and the Lord’s Supper as ordinances—acts that reveal our loyalty to Christ. They are symbolic ways of expressing our faith.

Read Matthew 28:19, 20; John 13:14; and 1 Corinthians 11:23–26. To what extent do these passages support the idea that the sacred acts should be described as “ordinances”?

However much importance we place on the “ordinances,” we must always remember that these are not conduits of grace or acts by which we earn salvation or gain merit before God. Sin and what it has done to us is far too serious a matter for rituals, even those instituted by Christ Himself, to be able to redeem us. Only the death of Jesus on the cross was sufficient to accomplish the salvation of beings as deeply fallen as we are. As we understand them, the ordinances are outward symbols of our acknowledgment of what Christ has done for us and of our union with Him (and all that this union entails), and they serve their purpose well. They are a means to an end, not an end in and of themselves.

Baptism

The New Testament uses several images to describe what baptism means. First, baptism symbolizes a spiritual union with Christ (*Rom. 6:3–8*), involving participation in His suffering, death, and resurrection, as well as the renunciation of one’s former lifestyle. In this way, baptism is linked with repentance and the forgiveness of sin (*Acts 2:38*); the new birth and reception of the Spirit (*1 Cor. 12:13*); and, consequently, entrance into the church (*Acts 2:41, 47*).

Baptism symbolizes a covenantal and spiritual relationship with God through Christ (*Col. 2:11, 12*). Baptism represents what circumcision represented in the Old Testament. And, too, baptism symbolizes a transfer of loyalties, one that places a person into a community that is consecrated to the service of Christ. The reception of the Spirit in baptism enables believers to serve the church and work for the salvation of those who are not yet of the faith (*Acts 1:5, 8*).

Many years ago the Joint Committee of the Church of England on Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion made an impressive admission. The statement said that “the recipients of Baptism were normally adults and not infants; and it must be admitted that there is no conclusive evidence in the New Testament for the Baptism of infants.”—*Baptism and Confirmation Today* (London: SCM, 1955), p. 34, quoted by Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), p. 1102. The meaning of baptism precludes infants as legitimate candidates, because biblical baptism requires faith and repentance on the part of the participants. Also, the idea of the role of the Word of God in the development of faith (*Rom. 10:17*) indicates that repentance must be coupled with biblical and spiritual instruction. These elements are necessary in order for candidates to bring forth “fruits worthy of repentance” (*Luke 3:8*) as evidence of their relationship with Christ.

The nature of baptism helps us to understand the difference between an ordinance and a sacrament. Baptism, according to those who see it as a sacrament, is the means that brings about the transformation in a person from spiritual death to life. In this understanding, the age of the person doesn’t matter, because it’s all a supernatural event anyway. On the other hand, baptism as an ordinance is an indication or symbol of an internal change (a supernatural event) that has already occurred in the life of the believer by way of his or her experience with Jesus. In this view, candidates for baptism ought to have already experienced faith in Christ; therefore, the question of who is baptized, and when, becomes very important.

If you have been baptized, think back upon the experience. When you understand what it means, why (in a sense) do we need to be “baptized” every day? How can this be accomplished?

The Ordinance of Humility

It's hard to imagine the pain that must have been going on in the heart of Jesus as He—about to face the Cross, the greatest humiliation possible—saw the jealousy and infighting among His own disciples over who would be the greatest in His kingdom.

Read Luke 22:24–27 (see also Matt. 18:1, 20:21). **What crucial truth had the disciples still not learned?**

Our world is so twisted and perverted by sin that it has it all backward, however “rational” and “sensible” backward may seem. Who in their right mind would rather be the one serving than the one served? Is not the whole point of life to get ahead, to become wealthy, and to be someone who is waited on and attended to by others rather than being one of the ones who serve? It's no wonder, then, that at the Last Supper, Jesus washed the disciples' feet. No words He could have said would have conveyed the truth of what real greatness is in the eyes of God more forcefully than His washing the feet of those who should have been kissing His.

What does John 13:1–17 teach us about foot washing as a part of the Communion service?

So much amazing truth rings out through these verses. In verse 3 it says that Jesus knew that the Father had given “all things into His hands.” What happens next? Yes, Jesus, knowing full well that “He had come from God and was going to God” (*NKJV*), rose from the meal and started washing the disciples' feet (*vs.* 5). Even without fully knowing who Jesus really was, the disciples must have been astonished. How could they have failed to see the lesson there?

Before claiming for ourselves all that Christ has done for us, remember how important it is to come to the Lord's Supper with a sense of our own humbleness and lowliness and need of divine grace.

Whose feet might it do you some immense spiritual good to wash?

The Lord's Supper

Read Matthew 26:26–28. What meaning is evident in what Jesus is telling us to do here? Why is it important to see this in terms of symbols?

The Lord's Supper replaces the Passover festival of the old covenant era. The Passover met its fulfillment when Christ, the Paschal Lamb, gave His life. Before His death, Christ Himself had instituted the replacement, the great festival of the New Testament church under the new covenant. Just as the Passover festival commemorated Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the Lord's Supper commemorates the deliverance from spiritual Egypt, the bondage of sin.

The Passover lambs' blood applied to the lintel and doorposts of each house protected the inhabitants from death; the nourishment that its flesh provided gave the children of Israel the strength to escape from Egypt (*Exod. 12:3–8*). So, Christ's sacrifice brings liberation from death; believers are saved through the partaking of both His body and blood (*John 6:54*). The Lord's Supper proclaims that Christ's death on the cross provides our salvation, provides our forgiveness, and promises us victory over sin.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:24–26. What important doctrinal truth about the Cross is revealed here?

Here we see, clearly, the substitutionary aspect of Christ's death. His body was broken and His blood shed for us; at the cross He took upon Himself what rightly belonged to us. Each time we partake of the Lord's Supper, we should always remember what Christ accomplished in our behalf.

When you add to the Lord's Supper the foot washing, which helps to prepare our hearts before we partake of the Communion service, we should also get a sense of the communal nature of this ordinance. With the Cross so vividly symbolized through the partaking of the bread and wine, we are reminded that, whatever earthly things divide us, we are all sinners in constant need of grace. The Communion service should help us all to realize our obligations, not just to the Lord but to one another, as well.

Anticipation of the Second Advent

“For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till he come” (1 Cor. 11:26). What great hope is presented here?

With these words we see how closely entwined the Second Coming and the Communion service are. That makes so much sense too, because the Second Coming is, really, the culmination of what happened at the Cross. One could argue that the biggest reason for the First Coming—which included Christ’s body being broken and His blood shed for us—was the Second Coming. The First Coming is what paved the way for the Second.

What good would the First Coming of Christ be without the Second?

The Communion service, in a sense, spans the interim between Calvary and the Second Coming. Each time we partake of communion, we dwell on the Cross and what it accomplished for us. Yet, what it accomplished for us cannot be separated from the Second Coming. In fact, what Jesus did on the cross for us doesn’t reach its ultimate culmination until the Second Coming.

Read Matthew 26:29. What is Jesus saying in this one verse?

Look at the promise, the assurance, and the hope that the Lord gives us here. These words imply a closeness, an intimacy, between the redeemed and the Redeemer that will extend into eternity. Jesus is promising us that He will not drink of this fruit of the vine until He drinks it new with us in the eternal kingdom. When we remember who He is, the Creator of the universe (*Col. 1:16*), this promise is even more astonishing. Thus, besides everything the Communion service points to, it should also point us to the great hope that awaits us at the Second Coming of Jesus.

Discouraged? Downtrodden? Welcome to a fallen world. Why, amid all that you may be going through, is it so important to look at the Cross, what it means for you now, and what it means for your ultimate future?

Further Study: Read the Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, chaps. 15–18, in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*.

“Baptism is a most sacred and important ordinance, and there should be a thorough understanding as to its meaning. It means repentance for sin, and the entrance upon a new life in Christ Jesus. There should be no undue haste to receive the ordinance. Let both parents and children count the cost.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 93.

“The Passover pointed backward to the deliverance of the children of Israel, and was also typical, pointing forward to Christ, the Lamb of God, slain for the redemption of fallen man. The blood sprinkled upon the door-posts prefigured the atoning blood of Christ, and also the continual dependence of sinful man upon the merits of that blood for safety from the power of Satan, and for final redemption.”—Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, p. 201.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ When was the last time that you washed someone’s feet in the foot-washing service? Why is this such an important practice?
- ❷ Read 1 Peter 3:20, 21. What analogy does Peter use in order to help to explain the meaning of baptism?
- ❸ Early Christians were accused of many things of which they were not guilty, including cannibalism. One of the reasons were the following verses: “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him’ ” (*John 6:53–56, NKJV*). What is Jesus teaching us with these words? Why is it so important that we understand the spiritual meaning of texts such as these?
- ❹ In class, discuss in more detail the communal aspect of the Communion service. What are ways in which it should help your church to better understand what our obligations are to each other and to the outside community as a whole?

Divine Appointment

I was a troublemaker in my village in India. My father had introduced me to alcohol when I was nine years old, and it had become an overpowering habit. I quit school and stole money to buy liquor. My family, my health, and my friends all suffered because of me.

I began spitting up blood. Frightened, I stopped drinking until the blood-spitting ended. Then I started drinking again. I was 23 years old and married. Our lives were miserable because of my addiction. I drank up my earnings and left my family to find food.

One night I staggered home drunk and saw a man waiting at a bus stop. He turned to me and said he was a man of God. I stopped to listen, and he told me, “There is a God who can solve your problems. I want to come to your house and tell you about Him.”

“I’m not interested,” I told him. “I’m a drunkard, and I don’t know God.” But the man walked with me to my home. There he told me about God. But I was too drunk to understand what he said. “I’m going to sleep,” I said. “You can sleep here until morning.”

The next morning I found the pastor still there, so we talked again. I was sober and could understand what he was saying about God. I was curious about this God who is alive and powerful and who answers honest prayers. I wanted to know more, so I went with the pastor to his house some 25 miles (40 km) to study with him.

God took away the desire for alcohol and cleared my mind. I accepted Jesus as my Savior, and my wife and I were baptized in 2008. Today I know that the meeting with the pastor was a divine appointment.

My wife and I began sharing God’s love with others. Today we serve as Global Mission pioneers, sharing God’s love in my home town, where everyone knew me as a troublemaker, a drunkard, and an idol worshiper. They can see what God is doing in my life, and I tell them that God can do the same in their lives.

So far God has given us 20 people for Christ. I’m working with 30 or 40 more people. I am filled with joy that God could use me, a drunken idol worshiper, to bring the love of Jesus to others. Thank you for your offerings that help to sustain the work of Global Mission around the world.

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