

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, footwashing, 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 its effects are matters far too serious 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 his or her 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 who serves? 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 feet.

What does John 13:1–17 teach us about footwashing 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 footwashing, 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 chapters 15–18, pp. 211–261, in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .*, 2nd ed. (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 2005).

“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. In what ways can it help your church to better understand what our obligations are to each other and to the outside community as a whole?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Acts 2:38*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe the spiritual transformations and truths symbolized by baptism, footwashing, and the Lord's Supper.

Feel: Sense the sacred nature of these Christ-ordained services through personal experience.

Do: Participate wholeheartedly in the communal expressions of faith provided for in the services of baptism, footwashing, and the Lord's Supper.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Ordained by Christ

A Why are the services of baptism, footwashing, and the Lord's Supper defined as ordinances rather than sacraments?

B These ordinances serve as symbols of what internal transformations?

C What truths of Christ's work in behalf of His people do these ordinances illustrate?

II. Feel: Sacred Experience

A How does personally experiencing baptism, footwashing, and the Lord's Supper differ from mentally accepting the doctrine regarding these services?

B As we look forward to His second coming, what is the value of submitting to Christ's request that these sacred rites be observed in remembrance of His sacrifice?

III. Do: Communal Expressions of Faith

A How do these sacred, communal rites build up church bonds and shared worship experiences? Why must we not neglect these opportunities to share in these expressions of faith?

B What can Christ's followers do in order to more fully experience the benefits of these ordinances?

► **Summary:** Baptism, footwashing, and the Lord's Supper are ordinances outlined by Christ as symbols of sharing in His suffering, accepting His death on our behalf, and sharing in a new life of service and commitment.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The ordinances of baptism, footwashing, and the Lord’s Supper are symbolic acts that commemorate important spiritual events central to the life of the believer.

Just for Teachers: Ask your class to comment on the role of rituals in their lives. At an individual level, family level, community level, and national level, what rituals do the students engage in? What is the purpose of those rituals?

Opening Activity: Whether or not we are conscious of it, we all have quotidian rituals that define our daily lives—waking up at a certain time every morning and taking the dog for a jog before heading off to work, reading the newspaper, et cetera. This week’s lesson deals with a different type of ritual—spiritual ones that are given to us in order to help us to feel connected to God. Consider with your class the way in which the ritual of footwashing is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. Explore some of the following examples with your class and ask members to draw upon Scripture for other examples:

- The first mention of footwashing in the Bible is one of hospitality in which Abraham says to traveling strangers, “ ‘Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree’ ” (*Gen. 18:4, NKJV*).
- In the story of Lot, we also read of footwashing. Lot offers travelers (angels) entering Sodom to “ ‘turn in to your servant’s house, and spend the night, and wash your feet’ ” (*Gen. 19:2, NKJV*).
- Other examples follow in the story of Laban and Rebekah (*Gen. 24:32*), a Levite and his concubine (*Judg. 19:21*), Abigail and David (*1 Sam. 25:41, 42*), et cetera.
- God commanded the priests to wash their hands and feet with water prior to entering the Holy or Most Holy Place or before offering sacrifices on the altar (*Exod. 40:30–32*).

Discuss: What functions did the act of footwashing serve in the Old Testament examples? Encourage your class to reflect on this act as one of hospitality, welcome, cleanliness, and service, among other things. As a practice that extended back throughout the great stories of Scripture, a practice of which the disciples were well aware, there was a deep cultural understanding and tradition of footwashing. How did Jesus’ act of washing His disciples’ feet both confirm and draw on those meanings and, at the same time, broaden them (for example, through enacting servant leadership)?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

Just for Teachers: Encourage your class to observe how the three spiritual ordinances studied this week—baptism, footwashing, and the observance of the Lord’s Supper—are interconnected rites, which, when practiced, reaffirm the core elements of living a sanctified life. Together, these three symbols constitute a virtuous cycle of salvation, acceptance of that salvation, receipt of forgiveness, and renewed acts of discipleship.

I. Baptism: The Entrance to Discipleship (*Read John 3:5 with your class.*)

The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 deals with the indispensable need to receive the eschatological gift of the Spirit, or, as John says, to be born out of the Spirit. This indwelling takes place concretely through the ordinance of baptism. The recipient of the new birth needs to be born of “water and the Spirit” (3:5, *NKJV*). In Christ’s dialogue with Nicodemus, the question is answered of how a person receives a part or share in Christ’s inheritance. It is conditioned on “being born again” from “above” at baptism. Baptism is the next logical step of faith after accepting Christ, for “he who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved” (*Mark 16:16, NASB*).

Jesus points to baptism as the entrance to discipleship. This emphasis is in harmony with His command to baptize those who accept Him as Lord and Savior (*Matt. 28:16–20*). Baptism teaches the necessity of repentance, of forgiveness, and of making the important decision of accepting Jesus as the Redeemer-King.

In John, baptism is symbolic as an essential requirement in the cleansing from sin. In the water of baptism, the believer is cleansed from sin. By connecting the water and the Spirit, Jesus expresses two great principles experienced by the believer—water stands for the cleansing that wipes out the sins of the past while the Spirit stands for the strengthening power of Christ that gives the believer victory.

Consider This: How is baptism a symbol of the soul cleansed from sin and in receipt of the Spirit of God?

II. Footwashing (*Read John 13:1–17 with your class.*)

Footwashing is a means of reconciliation with God and humanity. It is a constant reminder that humankind is in great need of continued cleansing

from post-baptismal sins, and that it stands in constant need of God’s love and grace, which issue forth in forgiveness, justification, and sanctification. At the same time, the ordinance of footwashing is a reminder to treat our fellow believers in the way that Jesus treats us; to forgive them and be reconciled with them so that we will create and maintain a community of love, unity, and fellowship that reflects the love of God. Thus, footwashing, correctly understood and practiced, will be the means to accomplish, or at least greatly contribute to bring about, that kind of community.

During the Last Supper (*John 13:2–4*), Jesus waited, presumably, to give an opportunity for one of the disciples to wash the feet of the group. When this didn’t happen, Jesus rose and proceeded to engage in an act of utter humility and love. In taking the role of a slave, He foreshadowed the role that He would play in His death on the cross and, in so doing, enacted the entire plan of redemption. Also, by washing His disciples’ feet, Jesus taught an eternal principle that His kingdom is based on self-sacrificing love and service and that the way to glory is the path of humility, service, and even death for others and to self.

Consider This: Why is footwashing a constant reminder that each disciple needs daily forgiveness and purification? How does it also show that the soul needs the regenerative power of the Spirit in order to lead a sanctified life?

III. The Lord’s Supper (*Read John 6:53, 54 with your class.*)

Observing the Lord’s Supper is central to our understanding of the necessity of Christ’s sacrifice for our salvation. John, in chapter 6, verses 53 and 54, notes that Jesus said to His disciples, “ ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day’ ” (*NASB*). In the ordinances of baptism, footwashing, and communion, we see the complementary aspects of water and blood—both of which are symbols of how we are saved and cleansed from sin. Ellen G. White, in *Early Writings*, comments that the blood and water represent forgiveness and the gift of life.—Page 209.

Consider This: How is the observance of the Lord’s Supper a symbol of Christ’s ultimate act of sacrifice for our salvation?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Spend some time discussing with your class other ways that the Lord’s Supper is symbolic, not only of Jesus’ death and

sacrifice on the cross but also of His ongoing attempts to feed and nourish us. Consider the following points and then answer the questions that follow:

1. Through the eating of a meal, we are “partaking” of food that becomes part of us. In the act of Communion, Jesus symbolically becomes part of us, and we become part of Jesus. As Jesus says, “ ‘Abide in Me and I in you’ ” (*John 15:4, NKJV*). Jesus is the heavenly Manna that we need to eat spiritually and partake of by faith on a daily basis so that we become one with Him.
2. Food and drink are necessary to sustain life, and, as such, the bread and wine of the Last Supper (the body and blood of Jesus) are necessary for our spiritual life. Jesus is both the “bread of life” and the “water of life.”
3. Eating provides enjoyment and pleasure. As the Bible says, “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (*Ps. 34:8, NKJV*).
4. Food provides us with the strength to carry out the duties and responsibilities of our daily life. Similarly, when we partake of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, we are given spiritual strength and insight to carry out our Christian privileges and duties.

Thoughts/Applications/Inductive Questions:

Reflect on the layered dimensions of the Lord’s Supper. Why does God use a meal (the Last Supper) as an ordinance? What is He trying to teach us?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Now is a good opportunity to review what has been covered in this week’s lesson. Everyone should understand the meaning and important aspects of each of the ordinances.

However, as with so many other rituals that are oriented around hugely meaningful events and have deep significance, these three ordinances risk losing meaning when we take them for granted.

Brainstorm: How can churches and pastors and the larger community celebrate these events so that they don’t feel so rote and ritualistic? How can individuals prepare to engage in them so that their hearts and minds are open to experiencing these rites in the meaningful way in which God intended us to experience them?