
INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ORDINANCES

Ordinances are foundational to our Christian faith and practices. Understanding the spiritual meanings and principles in each ordinance is essential to keep spiritual life and vitality in the church today. This article begins a series on the ordinances.

An ordinance is an external, visible ceremony or symbol that God has established with deep spiritual meaning. These “exercises” established by God remind us of spiritual truths that are vital to our spiritual life. Ordinances have been likened to a tree and its bark. The life of the tree is inside. The bark (ordinance) is the external, visible piece that protects the life inside but also shows something of the inner health of the tree. We know the two go together. You can’t have a good tree without bark, and you can’t have good bark without the life within the tree. To exercise the outward form of an ordinance without holding its inner meaning will result in dead formalism. But to focus only on the inner meaning without the outward expression is disobedience to God.

There are seven commonly taught ordinances in the Christian church today: baptism, communion, feet washing, the Christian woman’s veiling, the holy kiss, anointing with oil, and Christian marriage. It is my understanding that it was through the work of Daniel Kauffman’s book, “Doctrines of the Bible,” that the seven ordinances we commonly teach today were pulled together and taught as the seven ordinances of the Christian church.

In the mid-1500’s Dirk Philips listed four other ordinances we usually do not consider. They were: ordination, excommunication and the ban, love, and suffering with persecution. Many Brethren churches observe these seven: feet washing, the Lord’s supper (love feast), communion, anointing with oil, laying on of hands, assembling together, and the holy kiss. Many Protestant churches teach that an ordinance must meet three criteria to be an ordinance: (1) Instituted by Christ (2) Taught by the apostles (3) Practiced by the early church. With these criteria, they teach only two ordinances: communion and baptism.

The Catholic Church holds to seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders. They teach that a sacrament is necessary for salvation and that sacraments are the vehicles that issue God’s grace into the hearts of His people. In other words, a sacrament, they believe, produces a spiritual reality in a believer’s life. We believe the Bible teaches that an ordinance is a remembrance of and a reflection on a spiritual reality that has happened in our hearts.

The ordinances generally involve the body of believers. Most of them we cannot do ourselves. In this way, they are part of our collective experience as the body of Christ. They are a part of our identity in the body. The New Testament teaches an “inside” and “outside” in church life. “For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (1Co 5:12-13). Ordinances then are shared and experienced by those inside the body of Christ.

Ordinances help us remember the Truth they stand for. They bring us face to face with the Truth they represent. They sometimes confront our carnality on the spot! Ever struggle greeting someone while holding a grudge against them? Did you ever want to avoid washing feet with a specific person? God help us to find victory over these struggles. In this experience, we find direction from God. We are prompted to become more like Jesus.

Ordinances also provide a teaching tool for the rising generation. They form “memorials” that stand in our children’s remembrances. Psalm 78:5-7 says, “For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he

commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.” What impact does it leave on our children as they sit in church during a communion service? What impressions are left on their minds as their godly mother, in submission to God and man, puts on her covering every day? What do they learn as they observe a baptism? What a blessing we have to be able to raise our children in churches where the ordinances are kept! We should be teaching them what these things mean even while they are little. The world tries to captivate their young minds with allurements toward evil. How much will we “impress” spiritual life and truths on their minds and hearts?

Ordinances also serve as an inspiration for us. Jesus said, “If you know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17). The forbidden fruits of Satan’s kingdom let a bitter taste in our mouth in the end. But Christian obedience brings deep settled peace and joy that the world will never know. It is hard to describe this reality to an unbeliever. It must be experienced in sincerity and holiness to really understand this joy.

But Christian ordinances become wearisome to hearts that are growing cold spiritually. Casual Christianity waters down the importance of these important ordinances and silently lays them aside. It takes spiritual fervor and sincerity to enjoy and experience these spiritual realities. We should each personally test our attitudes toward, appreciation for, and practice of these ordinances. The spiritual life and vitality of each church is a result of the spiritual life and vitality of each member. As we look at each ordinance in the following articles, may we deepen our understanding and appreciation for them. May we improve our practices and gain a greater conviction for the ordinances God has given to us for our blessing and direction.

~Luke Bennetch