

March 6, 2005
College Baptist Church

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The Lord's Supper: Foretastes of Glory Divine

Luke 22:7-20

Affirmation #9: The Ordinances

"We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ has committed two ordinances to the local church, baptism and the Lord's Supper. We believe that Christian baptism is the immersion of the believer in water into the name of the triune God. We believe that the Lord's Supper was instituted by Christ for commemoration of His death. We believe that these two ordinances should be observed and administered until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ."

On the first Sunday of every month, we celebrate the Lord's Supper. That's what this week's affirmation agrees we should do. Observe it. Administer it. Regularly until the Lord Jesus returns. We don't do it because a doctrinal affirmation calls for it. We observe the Lord's Supper because Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed took bread and took the cup and commanded, (Lk 22:19) "Do this in remembrance of me." (1 Cor 11:26) "Do this to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

That's why we refer to this observance as an ordinance. We do this because it was "ordained" or instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ. We do this in obedience to his command.

Baptists, like quite a few other protestant denominations, believe that Christ instituted two such practices to be observed regularly in the church until his return. The other practice that we speak of as an ordinance in this way is baptism. Because we're celebrating one of these ordinances this morning and I wanted to keep our focus on it, I've divided this 9th affirmation up into two sermons and we'll return and speak about baptism by itself on another Sunday.

This coming Sunday happens to be Parents Weekend at the college and so I've thought it fitting to put our study of baptism off even past next week so that next Sunday we can add one extra study into this series on God's design for families and for parenting. There seems to me no front on which modern culture is pounding so hard against biblical patterns than there in this area of the family, so I think it deserves some special attention and that a parents weekend is a particularly appropriate time to give it that attention.

Believe it or not, the two Sundays after that will be Palm Sunday and Easter. I'm sorry to say I have to be out of town with a college program both of those Sundays, but I'm happy to say that Leonard White has agreed to preach both Sundays. So then we'll return, Lord willing, to this 9th affirmation for its other half, and the second ordinance of baptism, on the first Sunday in April.

I said that Baptists and other protestants, mainly in the same free-church tradition, speak of the practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper, as the Affirmation does with the word "ordinances." There are others of our protestant brothers and sisters in more "high church" traditions who observe these same two practices but who refer to them as "sacraments." There is a fairly significant distinction here, but in part that distinction depends on the emphasis that the various denominations attach to the terms.

Let me just quickly describe the difference and then explain what it is about it that inclines me to favor the Baptist interpretation of the scriptures on this question.

A "sacrament" is something set apart as sacred. And I certainly do affirm that gathering around this table today is a sacred thing. To refer to an act as a "sacrament" is also to speak about it as a "means of grace." Those who prefer that word complain, as one writer did that I found:

"When viewed as sacramental, [an act] is more than an act of man - it is a means by which God conveys grace. When viewed as an ordinance, [the act] is the testimony of the person [involved]. While it points back to an act of God in the person's life, God plays no role in the [act] - it is an act by a man (usually a pastor) performed [with other people, or in the case of baptism] on [another person]."

Another writer makes the point like this: "When reduced to merely an ordinance, baptism and communion are no longer about what God does, but what man does. There is nothing supernatural occurring, as if the supernatural

realm were off limits to the Creator of the universe, God merely observes as we commemorate His work. An ordinance is actor-centered."¹⁴

I think their objections to the word "ordinance" don't work, because they miss an important point. If that were really what Jesus meant in "ordaining" the Lord's Supper and baptism, then I might have to agree with their complaint. But I think the argument they use in favor of insisting on the word "sacrament" and rejecting the word "ordinance" makes the mistake of reducing Jesus' command to its outward behavior. If all you expect in coming to this table is an act of mental remembering that is focused on you, you haven't heard Jesus' command correctly. You've missed the "ordinance" completely!

Jesus does not call you to this table or to that baptistery to go through some motions and receive no joy or grace or communion with him. That would be like inviting somebody over to dinner at your house and then watching them eat through the kitchen door.

That is not an argument against calling these ordinances. That is simply a misunderstanding of what Christ ordained. To call the Lord's Supper an ordinance does not at all suggest that there is no means of grace present here. It only wants to stress that the grace isn't automatic or necessary. It is possible, after all, just to go through the motions and miss any communion with Jesus Christ and any feasting on his grace in your heart, if we do not come to this table by faith.

The objection on the other side against using the word "sacrament" rather than "ordinance" is expressed in one theological dictionary (*Baker's Theological Dictionary*, s.v.) like this: "The use of this word for baptism and the Lord's Supper affected the thought about these rites, and they tended to be regarded as conveying "grace" in themselves rather than as relating men through faith to Christ."

In other words, using the word "sacrament" can tend to stress the bread and the cup (or the act of going under water in baptism) as mediating grace materially through the elements rather than spiritually through faith. Using the word "ordinance," as I'm using the word in any case, wants to stress that the elements are a means of helping participants to feed our souls spiritually on Christ -- through the acts and elements, yes, -- but the active element is faith.

Now, I acknowledge that the word "sacrament" doesn't need to regard the elements as conveying grace in themselves rather than in our faith. If by "sacrament" you mean these actions and these elements can be a means of grace, but not on their own, and only by faith, then I can't object to the term.

But we need to remember that God can mediate grace and joy and hope to our hungry hearts by lots of other means, too, from meditating on his Word to serving a brother in need, to singing with all my heart in worship, to confessing my sins.

In the sense in which I'm accepting the word "sacrament" for the Lord's Supper then, I'd have to include all of these other activities and call them sacramental, too. But only two of these activities are singled out in particular by Christ for special ordaining. And so I prefer our Baptist Affirmation's term "ordinance."

The Roman Catholic church, as you may know, adds five others to the list of sacraments: confirmation; confession; anointing of the sick; the ordination of clergy; and the marriage of Christians. Again, these are good things to do. There are even scriptural admonitions to practice most of them. But only the Lord's Supper and Baptism are specifically admonished by Christ as ongoing commands until he comes.

The more significant distinction, though, lies between the Roman Catholic view of "sacerdotalism," that the sacraments actually have the power to convey the blessings they signify," and the view the Reformation fought for that the sacraments have no real power in themselves, but are emblems or instruments, which convey grace only because God conveys within them a promise that we claim in our hearts by faith. Nothing happens to this bread or this wine, we believe, and I believe scripture teaches, just because someone prays over it at this table, even if he is a priest.

It is true that Jesus said "this is my body," when he broke the bread, and we surely ought to take scripture literally when it speaks literally. But more importantly we should read it naturally and in its context.

In Lk 22:19 he took the bread and said "this is my body." Then in the very next verse he took the cup after supper and said "this cup is the new covenant." If we're going to insist that the bread has to become the real presence of the body, then we'd also have to conclude that the cup itself is transformed into a covenant. But no one argues that.

It is far more consistent to read the first statement in the same way we all agree we should read the second: this cup represents the covenant; this bread represents my body. Eat this as a reminder and as a proclamation of my broken body. It's no less natural than pulling a picture out of your wallet and saying, these are my kids, or these are my grandkids. Glossy paper is not your kids. The glossy paper shows the world what your kids look like. It proclaims them, until they come, and people can see them in person.

Even Martin Luther, who didn't believe the bread became the actual body of Christ argued that Christ's words had to mean that somehow, mystically, Christ's body was still really present along with the bread. His reason was that John 6:53 says, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves."

But his colleague in the Reformation, Ulrich Zwingli looked a little farther ahead in the context of Jn 6 again, to v.63, where Jesus said "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life." Baptists think Zwingli had a more defensible way of reading scripture when he said to Luther, "I remain firm at this text, 'The flesh profits nothing.' I shall oblige you to return to it." The clearest way to make sense out of Jesus words is to conclude that we feast on the body and the blood of Jesus spiritually, by faith, not physically.

So how do we benefit from the grace that is available at this table? How do we obey the command that ordained this regular practice of remembering the broken body and shed blood of Jesus at the Lord's Table?

I want to answer that question this morning by pointing to a past, a present, and a future aspect of this celebration that all play an indispensable role in understanding what we are called to do when we meet together like this for the Lord's Supper.

The past is the history of the Passover. That is the kind of meal Jesus was celebrating when he spoke these words to his disciples. The present is the proclamation and remembrance of the Lord's death and resurrection, which continues until he comes. And the future is the promise that Jesus is going to celebrate this feast again with his disciples in the kingdom of God. And all of us who share in this table by faith as believers today will be part of that banquet table in the Kingdom of God, because that banquet will be the marriage supper of the Lamb. We've talked about that already. We learned two weeks ago that we, the church, are the bride at that marriage celebration. That is going to be a glorious feast indeed!

Passover, Proclamation, and Promise. That is what this Table is all about. Let's just think briefly about each of these things that the meal at the Lord's Table represents.

The first thing that is clear from Luke's text is that Jesus is celebrating the Passover Seder with his disciples when he institutes this ongoing practice of gathering like this for communion. In 22:1 we read that the Passover was drawing near. In v.7 the day of the Passover sacrifice arrived, and Jesus sent his disciples off to prepare a large upper room in a certain man's house where they could celebrate the Passover.

Three times each year, the Jews made a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem for a national festival like this: Once for a week in the fall, just after the Jewish New Year (*Rosh HaShanah*) for the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles; a second pilgrimage week came in the spring called Passover or Unleavened Bread; a third feast came a week of weeks after Passover: 7x7 days and then the 50th, so it was called the Feast of Weeks in Hebrew or Pentecost in Greek. All three of these great pilgrimage feasts were commemorations of the Exodus when God liberated them from their captivity and brought them through the wilderness to a land of promise.

That's what Jesus promises at this Passover to fulfill. The exodus is another physical picture of what God promises to do for us: liberate us from our captivity to sin and to bring us into his own kingdom of heaven that he sets before us.

So the meal at this table is a Passover meal that looks back to the Exodus. The Passover consisted of *matzah*, bread without yeast, to symbolize the purifying work of God in removing all the leaven of sin and legalism from his

people. It consisted of bitter herbs to symbolize the bitterness of bondage that his people had endured for 400 years in Egypt.

And it consisted in a lamb, a spotless lamb in which care was taken that there be no broken bone. This was the sacrifice of the Passover. This symbolizes the blood of a lamb that Ex 12:13 says "shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood (God says), I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. The lamb died so that the people would live. The blood of the lamb was a promise of protection from the judgment of death that was falling on Israel's slavemasters.

All of that is on the mind of the disciples in the symbols on their Passover table. When Jesus took the bread and broke it and said this is my body, broken for you, they understood that this was a pure body, unleavened by the "*chametz*" of sin. A day later when they saw him crucified and fulfilling the sign of the bread they understood that he was also the spotless Lamb of God, taking away the sins of the world.

They had had a thousand years of practice, three times a year, to prepare them to understand this mystery of a Messiah who would come to be crucified instead of sitting on a throne. Symbols, like these here on this table helped them to understand that.

There were also four "cups" or four times one took a sip from the cup of wine in the Passover meal. Each cup was a reminder of one of the four promises God made Israel in Ex 6:6-7 -- I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians; I will deliver you from slavery to them; I will redeem you with an outstretched arm; and I will take you to be my people and to be your God.

With the first cup, the Cup of Sanctification, Jesus would have sanctified the feast with the traditional benediction: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the Vine."

The third cup was taken after the supper. It was called the cup of Redemption to recall the promise God made the Israelites in Egypt: I will redeem you. Jesus would have electrified his disciples when he told them (Lk 22:20) that from now on this is the cup of the new covenant in his blood. All the promises of Jer 31 came rushing in. With the shed blood of Jesus, the covenant that had been depicted for so long in outward pictures of escaping from Egyptians and crossing the Jordan and laws carved into stone would now be written inwardly on human hearts. This was the promise they had been waiting for, becoming real, right before their very eyes at this last supper.

So the Lord's Supper looks to the past and to a thousand years of Jewish history in remembering God's liberating work in the Passover. But in Lk 22 all of that history is becoming a present reality.

The herbs aren't just the bitterness of slavery to Egyptians. They're the bitterness of the sin that takes us captive and beats us up.

The bread isn't just the purified symbol of Israel, it's the purified symbol of the body of Christ that would be broken. And what else represents the body of Christ? The church, the new Israel, purified from the leaven of its sin by the broken body of Jesus.

The lamb isn't just the animal bought by the pilgrim at the temple to be sacrificed. The lamb is the Lamb of God, himself, sacrificed once for all so that God would pass over us for the Lamb's sake in administering the justice of death for sin.

And the cup is a sign that in Jesus' blood a new covenant has been instituted. What had been depicted for a thousand years as outward pictures now in Christ becomes inward reality.

As Paul summarizes this ordinance of Christ in 1 Cor 11, as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim (in the present) the Lord's death until he comes. Think about what that phrase, "until he comes" means. There's no Lord to come if he is dead and gone. Until he comes means that as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup we also proclaim the Lord's resurrection, or else there's no Lord there to return.

The table looks to the Passover in the past. In the present it proclaims to each of us who participates in it by faith that Christ has died and that Christ has risen.

But the table also looks to the future because Christ is coming again. And when he comes again, he promises to make the church, the community of those who trust his promises, his Bride. And when he does there will be another great feast in heaven, the marriage supper of the Lamb.

That's what the text from Revelation 19 in our Call to Worship is celebrating with such rejoicing and exultation. The voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah, for the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns!"

This table is not the just the fulfillment of promises made to Israel in its covenants. It is itself a promise to us of even greater things to come. Christ didn't die and rise 2000 years ago to leave us forever in this material world in combat with sin. He died and rose again to make us his bride in the kingdom of God and to enjoy the fellowship of feasting with him at his banquet table for the rest of eternity.

These elements today are just a taste of that. A foretaste of glory divine. A taste of that feast that we will enjoy forever with the bridegroom, Jesus Christ. What we will feast on for eternity in heaven is the joy that heaven takes in the mercy of God, expressed in the infinite sacrifice of Jesus Christ. There is no richer fare than the mercy of God. It is the joy that motivates God himself. To overflow with this kind of mercy was the reason scripture tells us that God created the world and created us. Mercy is where God comes to rest, the way a fountain comes to rest in overflow. And mercy -- grace -- is what we will feast on in the kingdom.

We have a taste of that joy before us here this morning. Let us feed on him in our hearts by faith.

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