

Local Church Membership and the Practice of the Ordinances

Dr. Rolland D. McCune
Professor of Systematic Theology
Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

For decades in fundamentalism/evangelicalism there has been a neglect of the doctrine, and thus the institution, of the local New Testament Church. This was due largely to the interdenominational or nondenominational nature of liberalism, neo-orthodoxy and new evangelicalism and the necessity of combating them across denominational lines. Post World War II crusade evangelism all but bypassed the local church. Seeker-sensitive mega-churches likewise were not tuned in to New Testament local church ideology and polity. “Chapels” rather than New Testament local churches sprang up noticeably.

While presently there seems to be discussion at least of local church planting and participation,¹ the biblical meaning and function of certain features of local church life seem not to be appreciated. This is especially related to the correlative nature of baptism, the Lord’s Table and membership. Taking the longer look, this confusion will prove (and is proving) to be detrimental.

I. INTRODUCTION.

A. The Definition of the Local Church.

1. The Body Church and the Local Church.

The Body of Christ (*universal church*) is the totality of Spirit baptized believers from the Day of Pentecost to the rapture, whether in heaven or on earth (e.g., I Cor 12:13; Eph 1:22-23). It does not include O.T. believers or tribulation martyrs or millennial saints. It is sometimes called the “invisible church” because the exact line between believers and unbelievers cannot be humanly discerned.. The *local church* is the visible expression of the Body of Christ in one *place* on earth (e.g., 1 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:2). A subset of the local church would be the *historical church*, a collective idea that embraces the local churches within a given period of *time* (e.g., Acts 9:31; 1 Cor 12:28).

2. Biblical Ingredients of the Local New Testament Church.

a. True believers in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41a, 47).

¹Tim Stafford, “Go and Plant Churches of All Peoples: Crusade and Personal Witnessing are No Longer the Cutting Edge of Evangelism,” *Christianity Today* (Sept 2007), pp. 68-72.

- b. Believers baptized/immersed in water as a public testimony of their faith in Christ (credobaptists) (Acts 2:41; Matt 28:19).
- c. Organized with the biblical ecclesiastical offices of pastor and deacon (Phil 1:1).
- d. Sharing a common faith or body of biblical truth around which to fellowship and work (Acts 2:41; Jude 3).
- e. Observing the biblical ordinances of baptism and communion (Acts 2:41, 42).
- f. Fulfilling the Great Commission (evangelism, teaching, etc.) (Matt 28:18-20).
- g. Meeting at regular and stated times for fellowship, worship, and service (Heb 10:25; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2).

B. The Ordinances of the Local Church.

1. Definition: What are the New Testament Ordinances?

“By the ordinances, we mean those outward rites which Christ has appointed in his church as visible signs of the saving truth of the Gospel.”²

“[The ordinances are] visible signs which appeal to the senses, [and] teaching institutions which appeal to the understanding and the heart.”³

The observance of the ordinances is to be *public*. Ordinances are not sacraments or means of grace. They are only material symbols or teaching pictures—visual aids—designed for the interim of Christ’s absence from the earth. No material object can initiate, sustain or complete a spiritual transaction or otherwise mediate the grace of God.

2. Delineation: How Can the Ordinances Be Identified?

What biblically constitutes a visible symbol or sign of the saving truth of the Gospel? Note the following four ingredients of a biblical ordinance (inductively) drawn from Scripture.

- a.. Sovereign authorization by the Lord Jesus Christ: Baptism (Matt 28:19); Communion (Matt 26:26-30).
- b. Symbolism of saving truth: Baptism (Spirit baptism); Communion (body and blood of Christ in present sanctification).
- c. Specific command for perpetuation in the Gospels and/or the Epistles: Baptism (Matt 28:19); Communion (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24-25).
- d. Biblical evidence of historical fulfillment or practice; confirmation in the Book of Acts basically: Baptism (Acts 8:41); Communion (Acts 20:7).

²A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), p. 930.

³Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1894), p. 120.

Accordingly, two ordinances fit the biblical criteria—baptism and communion. Other denominations add feet washing, love feast, anointing with oil, and the laying on of hands. The Brethren Church (not the Plymouth Brethren) has a three-fold communion service corresponding to the three-fold ministry of Christ to the believer: past salvation through the death of Christ (*eucharist*, or bread and cup), present sanctification (feet washing), and the future marriage of Christ and the church and the marriage supper of the Lamb (*agape* or love feast).

3. Depiction: What Do the Ordinances Represent?

a. Baptism.

(1) Commemorative: a *memorial* of the historical death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. (2) Emblematic: a *symbol* of the Christian's union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection and incorporation into the Body of Christ; i.e., Spirit baptism. (3) Predictive: a *prophecy* of the believer's bodily resurrection.

b. Communion.

(1) Commemorative: a *memorial* of Christ's broken body and shed blood. (2) Emblematic: a *symbol* of the Christian's ongoing participation in the benefits of Christ's atonement; i.e., present sanctification. (3) Predictive: a *prophecy* of the final gathering of the saints and Christ at His coming; i.e., at the marriage supper in the Kingdom.

4. Administration: Who Can Administer the Ordinances?

The local church is the custodian of the ordinances and only it can arrange for their performance. For example, it is often repeated that communion is simply, and only, the *Lord's table*,⁴ but that is not quite true. The ordinance is also, and equally, the table of the *local church*, who is the sole guardian of the ordinances. Some view the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) as applying only to the disciples of the First Century A.D., but the mandate reaches to the “end of the [church] age,” with the apostles as “foundational representatives” of the church for this age.⁵

As far as baptism is concerned, the local church principle nullifies non-church, private baptisms in backyard pools or lakes, or baptisms at a camp or other such parachurch meetings. This also invalidates communion observances in college/seminary chapels, wedding ceremonies, radio, TV or cyberspace “churches,” hospital rooms or other *ad hoc*, essentially private, gatherings.

⁴H. C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), p. 431.

⁵Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), p. 192.

The ordinances are usually administered by the duly licensed or ordained minister of the local church, but anyone designated by the church (member, interim or visiting preacher, deacon, staff person, or the janitor!) could perform the ordinances if necessary. "The validity [of baptism] depends on the character and profession of faith of the candidate, and not on that of the administrator."⁶ This applies also to the Lord's Table.

II. THE ORDINANCE OF WATER BAPTISM.

A. The Validity of Water Baptism.

What constitutes valid baptism? This must first be determined before other procedures and relationships to it are entertained. I suggest at least four rubrics.

1. Immersion in water as to mode. ("Mode" is actually a gross misnomer.⁷)
2. Administered by a local church to a true believer.
3. Correct biblical teaching by the baptizing church on the relationship of baptism to salvation. If baptism is thought to convey or complete salvation, it is invalid. If baptism is thought to transfer any grace or spiritual benefit of any kind, it is invalid.
4. Symbolism involved. If baptism symbolizes Spirit baptism and its once-for-all identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, then the first Scriptural administration of single immersion is valid baptism.

B. The Prerequisite to Water Baptism.

Water baptism is believer's baptism. It is thus the duty of the local church to obtain a credible testimony of salvation from the candidate, including satisfactory proof of a changed life and conduct. It must be ascertained that he is a true disciple (Matt 28:19), that he has honestly received the word (Acts 2:41).

C. The Necessity of Water Baptism.

Baptism is often called "the first act of obedience," meaning that after regeneration, the first official public act biblically mandated is baptism by the local church. New Testament baptism is the formal public announcement to the world that one is a Christian, that he has broken with his past life of sin and belongs to the regenerate community, the Body of Christ and its visible expression in a New Testament local

⁶Hiscox, *The New Directory*, p. 129; see also Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 948-49.

⁷Baptism *means* immersion. Mode would relate more to where (lake, tank, stream, etc.) and how (kneeling, standing, sitting on a stool, lying on a pallet [for the severely handicapped], etc.) (See John Broadus, *Immersion Essential to Christian Baptism* [Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1892], p. 8).

church. The New Testament knows nothing of an unbaptized believer; he is assumed to have obeyed the Lord in submitting to this outward testimony to his previous spiritual transaction (new birth).

D. The Inseparability of Water Baptism and Local Church Membership.

Baptism and church membership are correlative, each necessarily, mutually and reciprocally demanding the other. If water baptism symbolizes Spirit baptism (1 Cor 12:13; Rom 6:1-7), the biblical analogy would assert that just as Spirit baptism places one into the Body of Christ, water baptism is an initiatory rite that places one into the membership of the local body—the earthly expression of the universal body—for spiritual nourishment, maturity and service (Matt 28:19-20). There is always something *transcendent* about the local church that gives biblical validity to its visible membership, i.e., Spirit baptism. The baptism of the Holy Spirit incorporates one into the spiritual *organism*; water baptism administered by the local church places one into the greater body's earthly *organization*.

Other aspects of church polity mandate that a vote of the congregation accompanies membership, but such a vote is always contingent on the reception of baptism. Therefore it is improper for the local church to baptize someone who is not willing thereby to become part of the membership. In Baptist polity, once one becomes a member, thereafter membership is simply “transferred” by letter to a sister church of like faith and practice.

Excursus: Current Controversy

It is being advocated in some circles, even Baptist (God forbid), that there are no requirements for church membership that are not requirements for salvation itself, i.e., “open” church membership. Wayne Grudem originally sought a middle-of-the-road position between credobaptism (believer’s baptism) and paedobaptism (infant baptism) as to which is essential to church membership. His proposal is tantamount to open church membership. He suggests that both parties

come to a common admission that baptism is not a major doctrine of the faith, and that they are willing to live with each other’s views on this matter and not allow differences over baptism to be a cause for division within the body of Christ. Specifically, this would mean allowing both views of baptism to be taught and practiced in denominations on both sides of the question.⁸

More recently, however, Grudem changed to a more restrictive position, understanding baptism as necessary for membership. This was done (correctly) to uphold the validity and biblical importance of the ordinance itself. He now says,

For someone who holds to believer's baptism, admitting to church membership someone who

⁸*Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 982.

has not been baptized upon profession of faith, and telling that person that he or she never has to be baptized as a believer, is really giving up one's views on the proper nature of baptism. It is saying that infant baptism really is valid baptism! But then how could anyone who holds to this position tell anyone who had been baptized as an infant that he or she still needed to be baptized as a believer? This difficulty makes me think that some kind of "compromise" position on baptism is not very likely to be adopted by denominational groups in the future.⁹

John Piper also underwent a recent change of personal thinking, going from the restrictive necessity of credobaptism to its non-necessity for church membership. In reply to Grudem's new position, Piper graciously spells out his disagreement and in so doing sets forth his own new thinking that paedobaptism (and essentially no baptism) would also be permissible under certain circumstances (the members of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, have yet to ratify his new views). Piper would say to paedobaptists (e.g., in this reply, to Ligon Duncan, Sinclair Ferguson, R. C. Sproul or Philip Ryken):

Brothers, I think you are not baptized. But you believe on biblical grounds as you see them, with as much humility and openness to truth as God has given you, that you are baptized. Your understanding of baptism does not imply that Christ's command may be neglected or that infant sprinkling is regenerating. You give good evidence of being born again and that you embrace Christ as your Savior and Lord and Treasure, and you manifest an authentic intention, on the basis of that faith, to follow Jesus as Lord and obey his teachings. Therefore since there is good evidence that you are members of the Body of Christ, you may be members of this local expression of that body. But understand this: I will spend the rest of my ministry trying to persuade you that you and your children should follow through on the full obedience to Jesus and be baptized. In admitting you, I do not give up on my view of baptism. That is the whole point. We are finding a way to work on this agreement from inside the body of Christ in its local expression.¹⁰

III. THE ORDINANCE OF COMMUNION or THE LORD'S TABLE.

A. The Prerequisites to the Ordinance of Communion.

1. Regeneration and an Orderly Walk.

The Bible (as well as the symbolism of the ordinance itself) indicates that regeneration is necessary to a valid participation in the Lord's Table. Acts 2:41, 42—"Those who had *received his word*...were continually devoting themselves...to the *breaking of bread* and prayer."¹¹ 1 Corinthians 11:28—"But let a man examine himself, and so let him *eat of the bread* and drink of the cup." A believer who is

⁹*Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, 2000), pp. 983-84. The whole revised section is on pp. 982-84.

¹⁰<http://adrianwarnock.com/2007/08/john-piper-disagrees-with-wayne-grudem.htm>, accessed 9/3/2007.

¹¹Italics in a biblical quotation are added by the writer.

guilty of serious sins and is not walking orderly can (and must) be excluded from the table (essentially by church discipline).

2. Valid Water Baptism.

(a) Seen in the practice of the early church. Those who had received the word and were baptized gave themselves to breaking bread (Acts 2:41). (b) Seen in the symbolism of the ordinance. Baptism symbolizes Spirit baptism (simultaneous with regeneration); communion symbolizes progressive sanctification, as growth follows birth.

3. Local Church Membership. (“In good standing”)

Since communion is a local church ordinance, one must be a member to partake. Acts 2:41—Those who broke bread (v. 42) were those who had received the word of Peter, were baptized, and had been “added” that day.

As was noted previously, valid baptism is an initiatory rite into the membership of the local church in the last analysis. Baptism and church membership are inseparable in the New Testament, the reason being that church membership is the New Testament way of formally guaranteeing one’s Christian life and character. Baptism/church membership is the only way a local church as a congregational/democratic body can have evidence of one’s profession of regeneration. *It is the only way a local church can **officially** approve someone’s life and conduct and admit him to the fellowship of the church’s table.* In this sense, then, church membership is sort of a legal admittance to the Lord’s Table. Therefore it is a necessary prerequisite to the partaking of communion.

Mark E. Dever says correctly: “... membership is the church’s corporate endorsement of a person’s salvation. We need to understand this: membership in a church is a church’s corporate testimony to the individual member’s salvation”¹²

B. The Administration and Observance of Communion.

There are basically two approaches to serving communion by the local church with reference to prerequisites—unrestricted and restricted/strict.

1. Unrestricted Communion.

In this practice, commonly called “open” communion, the elements are served to any believer present. In this view there are no terms for communion that are not terms for salvation itself. Wayne Grudem opts for open communion despite his switch to the

¹²*A Display of God’s Glory: Basics of Church Structure* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), pp. 53-54.

necessity of baptism for (closed?) membership. His argument is that “the person's non-participation symbolizes that he or she is *not* a member of the body of Christ which is coming together to observe the Lord's Supper in unified fellowship.”¹³ He goes on to say that a non-baptized believers should be urged to be baptized as soon as possible but should not be excluded from the table.¹⁴

This ignores the local church's possession and oversight of the table; it was not given to the universal church. See A. H. Strong for other problems with and objections to open communion.¹⁵

2. Restricted or Strict Communion. Two types prevail.

a. “Closed” Communion.

In this view communion is served only to believers who are immersed and members in good standing of the serving church. It is served only to those who have a “right” to the table, i.e., those over whom the church has ecclesiastical authority.

b. “Close” Communion in the Popular Sense.

In this position communion is served to immersed believers who are members in good standing of the serving church or of another New Testament type church, one of “like faith and practice.” This seems to be the biblical pattern.

1) Paul broke bread with believers at Troas (Acts 20:7, 11). It is highly unlikely that he was a member of that church.

2) Paul was not likely a member of the local church at Corinth when he introduced communion to them (1 Cor 10-11), nor for that matter was he probably a member of the other churches at whose inception he apparently always introduced the ordinance of communion.

Hiscox has the right perspective:

Strictly speaking...the *privileges* of a Church are coextensive with the *authority* of the Church. A right to the communion, therefore, is limited to

¹³*Systematic Theology*, p. 997.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Systematic Theology*, pp. 977-80. He notes: (1) It assumes an inequality between the two ordinances. (2) It tends to do away with baptism altogether. (3) It tends to do away with church discipline. (4) It tends to do away with visible church membership.

those over whom the Church exercises the right of discipline; that is, its own members. Consequently, if the members of sister churches are invited to partake, it is an act of courtesy proffered, and not a right allowed. This rule would of itself forbid a general, open, or free communion, since that would bring in persons whose characters the Church could not know, and whom, if they were unworthy, the Church could not discipline or exclude.¹⁶

¹⁶*The New Directory*, pp. 139-40.