


Although ordinance and sacrament are listed as synonyms in the dictionary, there are some practical theological differences in what they connote. Sacrament usually has the idea of conveying grace automatically to the one partaking of the sacrament. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent said, “A sacrament is something presented to the senses, which has the power, by divine institution, not only of signifying, but also of efficiently conveying grace.” Ordinance, on the other hand, though variously defined, usually does not include the concept of effectively conveying grace to the participant. Using the basic idea in ordinance of “prescribed rite or practice,” a working definition of an ecclesiastical ordinance might be “an outward rite prescribed by Christ to be performed by His church.” Such a definition would reduce the possible number of ordinances to two—baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It would eliminate, for instance, marriage (though often called an ordinance) simply because it was prescribed long before Christ. At any rate, without quibbling over the word itself, all we need to discuss here are those two ordinances which all agree are the principal ones.

The Lord’s Supper. Various groups hold to different meanings for the Lord’s Supper. The Roman Catholics teach that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ, though they obviously do not change their appearance. This view is called *transubstantiation* and is definitely unscriptural because it includes the idea that the body and blood of Christ are offered every time the mass is celebrated. In contrast to this, the Bible clearly and emphatically states that His death was complete, effective, and once for all ([Heb 10:10](#); [9:12](#)). Lutherans hold that the participant partakes of the true body and blood of Christ “in, with and under” the bread and wine, though there is no change in the

elements at all. This many called *consubstantiation*. Others believe (and I think correctly) that the supper is strictly a memorial (1 Co 11:24-25—“in remembrance”), the elements being unchanged and Christ present in the service but not in the elements in any way.

There are several purposes served in observing the Lord’s Supper: 

1. It is a remembrance of the life and death of our Lord. The bread symbolizes His perfect life, which qualified Him to be an acceptable sacrifice for sin, and the body in which He actually bore our sin on the cross (1 Pe 2:24). The wine represents His blood shed for the remission of our sins. We can never anticipate seeing that body again or another shedding of His blood, so this has to be a remembrance.

2. The supper is an announcing of these basic facts of the gospel (1 Co 11:26).

3. The supper serves to quicken our anticipation of His second coming, for we are reminded that we observe it only until He comes again (1 Co 11:26).

4. The supper should remind us of our oneness with each other in the body of Christ and of the fellowship which we share as fellow members of that body (1 Co 10:17).

How often should the Lord’s Supper be observed? Some churches do it every three months and usually precede it by a preparation service sometime during the week before the Sunday it will be observed. Others do it once every month, while some feel it should be observed every Sunday. Actually the Scriptures do not clearly specify the exact frequency of taking the Lord’s Supper. Although the first believers apparently did it daily immediately following Pentecost, this does not mean that it was observed in every house gathering every day but only daily somewhere in the city of Jerusalem (Ac 2:46). At Troas (Ac 20:7) it was

observed on Sunday, but the text does not explicitly state that it was done every Sunday, though such a conclusion would be easily inferred from the passage. But however frequently it is done, it might be well to observe it sometimes in the evening service—not only because it was a supper, but also because this allows those who may be prevented from coming to a morning observance to participate on a regular basis. Since it is one of the most important things a church does, it should always be given ample time and never “tacked on” and rushed through.

Baptism. The matter of water baptism involves two questions: How should it be done (mode) and on whom should it be performed (subjects—believers only or also infants). But before plunging into those questions, a word might be in order about the meaning and importance of baptism.

Any definition of baptism will have to be broad enough to include its use in relation not only to Christian baptism but also Jewish proselyte baptism, Spirit baptism, and even that rather strange use in [1 Corinthians 10:2](#). Most definitions are constructed in terms of the etymological idea of immerse or submerge, but a theological definition of baptism would best be understood in terms of identification or association with something like a group or message or experience. This idea will fit the varied uses of baptism without injecting the question of mode.

Nonetheless, the mode of baptism has been and continues to be a much-debated question. Arguments for nonimmersion include the following:

1. The Greek word *baptizo* has a secondary meaning which means “to bring under the influence of,” and of course pouring or sprinkling better pictures coming upon than immersion.

2. Indeed, if baptism illustrates the Spirit’s coming upon a person, then pouring or sprinkling water on the top of the head best pictures

this.

3. Immersion would have been highly improbable, if not impossible, in instances like those recorded in [Acts 2:41](#) (too many people involved for immersion), [Acts 8:38](#) (too little water available in a desert place), and [Acts 10:47](#) and [16:33](#) (not enough water in a house for Immersion).

4. In [Hebrews 9:10](#) the word *baptism* is used to include all sorts of Old Testament rituals, even those which involved sprinkling; thus the word does not always mean immerse exclusively.

5. The Greek language has an unmistakably clear word that means *dip*. Why isn't that used if this is the correct mode of baptism?

Arguments for immersion include the following:

1. Immerse is the primary meaning of the Greek word *baptizo*.
2. The normal understanding of the prepositions "into" and "out of" (the water) would indicate that immersion was practiced.
3. The baptism practiced on a proselyte to Judaism was a total immersion (though self-performed, not by another), and this would indicate that Christian baptism followed the same customary mode (though performed by another on the one being baptized).²
4. Immersion best pictures the significance of baptism which is death to the old life and resurrection to the new ([Ro 6:1-4](#)).
5. Immersion was the universal practice of the early church and every instance in the New Testament either demands or permits it (3,000 people could have been baptized in the various pools around Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost).
6. The Greek language has words for pour and sprinkle but these are never used of baptism.

² Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 2:745-47.

One seems driven to the conclusion that immersion is the biblical mode. Immersion seems to have been the mode of baptism practiced universally in the early church. This is the most natural meaning of the word used and of the picture conveyed by the ordinance. The first exception to immersion was pouring, not sprinkling, and it was allowed in cases that could not be immersed such as sick people. Indeed, pouring was called “clinical baptism.” Cyprian († A.D. 200–257) was evidently the first to approve of sprinkling, though it was not generally practiced until †the twelfth century.

The other question concerns the proper subjects for baptism—believers only or should infants also be baptized? The arguments for infant baptism include:

1. The analogy between circumcision (which obviously was done on infants) as the initiatory rite into the old covenant and baptism into the new.
2. Baptisms of entire households would certainly have included infants (as in [Ac 16:33](#)).
3. The New Testament seems to make promises to households where there is at least one believing parent; therefore, to baptize the infants in such households is quite proper ([1 Co 7:14](#)).

Arguments against infant baptism and for believers’ baptism include:

1. If baptism is an initiatory rite it must only be performed on those who have exercised faith in Christ and thus have been made members of God’s family. Only natural birth was necessary to become a member of Israel; but since the new birth is required to be a member of God’s family today, then only those who can consciously exercise faith should be baptized.
2. Household baptisms in the New Testament do not specify the presence of infants.

3. There is no decisive evidence for the practice of infant baptism either by the Jews or Christians in apostolic times. If baptism is the sign of association with Christ and Christianity, then the sign should only be used by those who have so associated. And since the only way to associate is through the personal act of faith in Him, then baptism can only be properly experienced by those who have believed. It is clear, for instance, that all in the household of the Philippian jailor were of sufficient age to be able to hear and understand the word of the Lord which Paul preached to them ([Ac 16:32](#)). Thus those who believed and were baptized had reached an age of being able to understand intelligently. This may have included children, but not infants.

What about rebaptism? There is one clear example in the New Testament of such, and that is of the baptized disciples of John the Baptist who were later baptized with Christian baptism after hearing and responding to the Christian message as preached to them by Paul ([Ac 19:1-7](#)). This incident shows that John the Baptist's baptism and Christian baptism were not identical, and that even though one has been baptized before, when he becomes a believer in Christ he should be baptized again as a testimony of his identification with the new message and group.