

**Ordinance or Sacrament:
Is the Baptist View of the Ordinances Truly Biblical?**

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What is the meaning and purpose of Christian baptism and the observance of the Lord's Supper? This question addresses one of the major disagreements between Baptists and other groups. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches insist that baptism and the Supper belong to a group of rituals called sacraments that, in some way, impart salvation.¹ For example, Ion Bria, an influential theologian of the Romanian Orthodox church, stated:

Baptism with water, or the sacrament of initiation or birth in Christ through immersion in water and the invocation of the Holy Trinity. . . . [It] is the beginning of new life in Christ. Baptism is not given merely for justification or only for the forgiveness of hereditary sin but especially as regeneration, as the restoration of fallen humanity, as the recuperation of a positive identity. . . . Through triple immersion negative humanity is destroyed.²

Thus in Romanian Orthodox theology, water baptism imparts forgiveness and justification, effects the new birth, and replace man's identity as sinner with a new identity as saint. In a similar vein, Ludwig Ott, a prominent Catholic theologian, wrote:

¹Readers should be aware that some Baptist theologians who do not view the ordinances as saving sacraments are willing to describe the ordinances as sacraments with reference to the etymological sense of the term. A. H. Strong, for example, argued: "No ordinance is a sacrament in the Romanist sense of conferring grace; but, as the *sacramentum* was the oath taken by the Roman soldier to obey his commander even unto death, so Baptism and the Lord's Supper are sacraments, in the sense of vows of allegiance to Christ, our Master." See Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, N.J.: 1907), 930.

²Ion Bria, "Taina," *Dictionar de Teologie Ortodoxa* (Bucuresti: Editura Institutului Biblic si de Misiune, 1994). Author's translation.

Baptism is that Sacrament in which man being washed with water in the name of the Three Divine Persons is spiritually reborn. . . . Baptism, provided that the proper dispositions (Faith and sorrow for sin) are present, effects: a) eradication of sins, both original sin and, in the case of adults, also personal, mortal or venial sins; b) inner sanctification by the infusion of sanctifying grace.³

Ott further explained that baptism may incorporate even those who do not believe or repent into the mystical body of Christ since the faith of the church can substitute for the faith of the individual and since baptism has an efficacy that is independent of the state of the recipient or of the minister.⁴

Baptists insist that baptism is a mere symbol of our union with Christ and our participation by faith in his death, burial and resurrection. Baptism pictures but does not produce the washing away of our sin. Forgiveness of sin depends only on our genuine personal faith in the crucified, resurrected and ascended Christ.

When presented with texts such as Romans 6:4 or Acts 2:38, Baptists may wonder whether the Baptist view of the ordinances is more traditional than biblical. At least on the surface, such texts seem to imply that baptism accomplishes union with Christ and the forgiveness of sin. Such doubts dissipate, however, when one closely examines Paul's instruction to the church at Corinth regarding baptism and the Lord's Supper. The teaching of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:1-12 constitutes the clearest biblical justification for the Baptist view that baptism and the Lord's Supper are symbolic rituals commanded by Christ rather than sacraments that actually grant salvation. This article will guide readers in understanding this crucial text and in considering its doctrinal implications.

³Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Bastible, trans. Patrick Lynch, 4th ed. (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books, 1960), 350-354.

⁴Ott, *Fundamentals*, 328-330.

The Apparent Doctrinal Confusion at Corinth

First Corinthians 9:24-27 and particularly 1 Corinthians 10:12 suggest that the Corinthians had a false view of eternal security that granted them the liberty to persist presumptuously in a sinful lifestyle without fear of divine retribution. They assumed that since there was nothing they could do to forfeit their salvation, they had nothing to lose by living a lifestyle of heinous sinfulness. The Corinthians flaunted their licentiousness with their libertarian motto that Paul quotes, then corrects and qualifies: “Everything is permissible for me” (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23). The Corinthians had relations with prostitutes, gloried in incest, participated in idol worship, and turned the Lord’s Supper into a pagan beer bash. But they claimed, “once saved, always saved!” “We can live any way we want to live!” The fact that Paul interjects a discussion of baptism and the Lord’s Supper into his challenge to the Corinthian’s distorted view of eternal security suggests that the Corinthian presumption of salvation was grounded in sacramentalism.⁵ This suspicion seems to be confirmed by the “baptism for the dead” mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:29. While the reference is obscure and scholars still debate the motivations for this apparently vicarious baptism for the deceased, the most plausible explanation is that the Corinthians viewed baptism as a saving sacrament.⁶ Consequently, when believers died before they had an opportunity to be baptized, the church deemed it necessary that another receive

⁵Sacramentalism is the belief that sacraments are inherently efficacious and necessary for salvation. Older theologians distinguish sacramentalism from Sacramentarianism, which is the belief that sacraments are mere visible symbols. Although modern theologians used the terms “sacramental” and “Sacramentarian” interchangeably, historically, one term was the opposite of the other. For a good introduction to sacramental theology with bibliography, see Sinclair Ferguson and David Wright, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1988), 606-8. See also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 966-87.

⁶Some scholars have counted more than two hundred different interpretations of the “baptism for the dead” through Christian history. See K. C. Thompson, *Studia Evangelica* (Akademie-Verlag, 1964), 647.

baptism in behalf of the deceased believer.⁷ By appealing to Old Testament history, Paul shows that a lifestyle of heinous sinfulness is inconsistent with genuine Christianity and that participation in mere outward rituals will not protect a person from the judgment of God.

Paul's Challenge to the Corinthian Sacramentalism

In 1 Corinthians 10:1-5, Paul compared the events of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to the ordinances of the Christian faith. He argued that the Israelites were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. When the Israelites passed through the Red Sea they were completely surrounded by water. Water was above them in the form of the cloud. The parted waters of the Red Sea surrounded them both to the right and to the left. These devotees to Moses were in a sense “immersed” as God began their deliverance just as disciples of Christ are immersed immediately after their conversion.

Paul referred to the Israelites partaking of the manna in Exodus 16 as eating “spiritual food.” Similarly, he referred to their enjoyment of the miraculous provision of water in Exodus 17 as “spiritual drink.” By calling the manna and water “spiritual food” and “spiritual drink,” Paul is purposefully comparing them to the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. The fact that Paul designates Christ himself as the source of the miraculous water may imply that drinking this water was a form of “communion” with Christ so that the water and manna even more closely parallel the Supper shared by Christian disciples.

⁷See Thomas Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 2001), 376; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. George W. MacRae, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 275. Allusions to such practices in heretical movements within the early church appear in Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.10; Chrysostom, *Homily on 1 Corinthians* 40.1; Epiphanius, *Heresies* 28; and Philaster, *Heresies* 49.

While careful reflection may suggest some other parallels between these Old Testament events and the New Testament ordinances, Paul does not appeal to the Old Testament images to teach what the ordinances do mean but rather to demonstrate what they do not mean. Paul is simply demonstrating that God's Old Testament people participated in an "immersion" that is roughly analogous to Christian baptism and a spiritual meal that loosely parallels the Lord's Supper in order to present a biblical response to sacramentalism.⁸

Paul uses a strong adversative conjunction to emphasize that despite the fact that "all" were baptized and "all" partook of the "same" spiritual meal, God was not pleased with most of them and their bodies were scattered over the desert. Even Corinthian church members from pagan backgrounds had enough exposure from the Septuagint to the history of God's people to know that of the thousands who were baptized into Moses and ate the spiritual meal, only two, Joshua and Caleb, actually entered the Promised Land. Paul's point is clear. The mere fact that the Hebrews participated in "baptism" and the "spiritual meal" did not guarantee their salvation. The obvious implication of Paul's illustration is that the Corinthians' observance of the New Testament ordinances did not guarantee their salvation either.

New Testament scholars typically apply a method called "mirror-reading" to the study of the New Testament epistles. Mirror-reading attempts to reconstruct the problems within the church addressed in the epistle by analyzing clues in the author's response to the church. A person who is standing in a room with someone who is involved in a telephone conversation can often reconstruct the gist of the discussion of the party on the other end of the line, even though he can't actually hear it, based on the responses of the speaker that he can directly hear. In a

⁸Conzelmann agrees: "It should be noted that his [Paul's] thought moves back to the Old Testament from the present datum, baptism, and certainly does not vice versa derive and interpret baptism from the Old Testament. Paul does not seek a point-for-point correspondence." *1 Corinthians*, 166.

similar way, Paul's response to the church enables interpreters to reconstruct the doctrinal problem that he is addressing with a high degree of accuracy. Evidently, the Corinthians held a sacramental view of the NT ordinances.⁹ They believed that baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper guaranteed their salvation. As long as a person was baptized and took communion, his soul was safe and eternal life in heaven was assured. Tom Schreiner aptly commented:

Probably the Corinthians overemphasized the significance of baptism. 1 Corinthians 10 suggests that some understood baptism and the Lord's Supper in a magical sense, thinking that by partaking in these they were preserved from any harm so that they could sin with impunity.¹⁰

Probably the Corinthians carried this concept into the church from their pagan background. In some pagan religions, initiation into the cult through ceremonial washings or baptisms and communion with the god through food and drink guaranteed salvation through that pagan god.¹¹ Some groups today hold a sacramental view of the ordinances, not realizing that the view is not grounded in Scripture but was imposed upon the church under the syncretistic influence of pagan religions.

Paul forcefully decried the magical view of the ordinances at Corinth. He insisted that baptism and communion do not guarantee salvation. Appealing to familiar Old Testament

⁹Interestingly, Leon Morris, who in *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 81-82, attributes an efficacy to baptism to which most Baptists would object recognizes that 1 Corinthians 10 may imply that "some of the Corinthians felt that their baptism and their use of Holy Communion guaranteed their final salvation, no matter what they did. Paul warns them that this is not so." See Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, vol. 7, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 138. See also Richard B. Hays, *1 Corinthians*, Interpretation, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 159.

¹⁰Schreiner, *Paul*, 376.

¹¹See Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 167.

narratives, he demonstrated that all the Hebrews were baptized and took communion but God destroyed more than he saved.

After establishing the basic premise that baptism and spiritual meal do not guarantee salvation, Paul warns that the Corinthians have much more in common with the Hebrews than baptism and communion. They were reenacting the same sins that brought about the destruction of the Hebrews in the wilderness.¹²

First, Paul demonstrates that the “baptized” and “Lord’s Suppered” Hebrews fell under divine judgment because of the sin of idolatry. Paul’s citation of the Septuagintal form of Exodus 32:6 shows that Israel’s worship of the golden calf was in mind. While Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the Hebrews made a golden calf that probably closely resembled idols that they had seen in Egypt. They burned offerings to the idol and participated in a feast in its honor. When Moses returned, he ground the calf into powder, mixed it with water and forced the Hebrews to drink it. Then he commanded the Levites to slay the idolaters and, in one day, three thousand were killed. Baptism into Moses and participation in a spiritual meal did not protect the Israelites from divine wrath when they adopted idolatrous practices.

Paul’s use of this illustration was intentional since the Corinthians were involved in similar idolatrous practices. They were “eating and drinking” in idolatrous feasts at pagan temples in Corinth and were indulging in pagan revelry. Paul treats the issue of idol feasts extensively in 1 Corinthians 10:14-21 and in 1 Corinthians 8. The Corinthian church members

¹²The grammar of verses 7 and 10 suggests that the Corinthians were already involved in idolatry and grumbling. Although the negative with the present imperative may merely express a general prohibition, the construction often calls for the cessation of an activity already in progress. The fact that Paul indicts the Corinthians elsewhere for their idolatry and their rejection of his spiritual leadership (1 Cor. 4; 10:14-22) confirms that the latter nuance is present here. For a discussion of the syntax of the prohibitions see Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 724-25.

argued that participation in the idol feasts was harmless since the so-called pagan gods were non-existent. Paul, implicitly appealing to texts such as Psalm 106:37, argued that while pagan gods are nonexistent, demonic spirits were active in false religion and participation in the idol feasts involved fellowship with these demons. “Pagan revelry” was the sensual dancing in pagan religion that resulted in sexual orgies.¹³ Possibly, the Corinthian men were cavorting with prostitutes during the idol feasts (1 Cor. 6:12-20). In response, Paul warned the Corinthians that they could not claim the protection of the ordinances when they practiced idolatry. The Hebrews who received similar ordinances were destroyed for the very same behavior.

Paul also condemned the sexual immorality of the Corinthians. He referred to Numbers 25 where the Israelites participated in the idol feasts and sexual orgies connected with the worship of Baal. At God’s command, the judges of Israel impaled all of the chiefs of the people. Phinehas slew a Midianite woman and Israelite man in the very act of fornication, an act which God rewarded by granting Phinehas a covenant of perpetual priesthood. Ultimately, a heaven-sent plague wiped out between twenty-three and twenty-four thousand Israelites for sexual offenses and idolatry.

The Old Testament narrative had obvious implications for members of the Corinthian church. 1 Corinthians 6 demonstrates that the Corinthians were guilty of engaging in sexual acts with prostitutes. These acts of immorality may have been connected to ritual prostitution in which priestesses in the pagan temples had relations with men and women as a form of worship

¹³Gordon Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 454-55.

to pagan fertility gods and goddesses.¹⁴ Paul's unrelenting application of the Old Testament narratives was designed to show the Corinthians that if the Hebrews were not protected from God's judgment for their immorality even though they had been baptized and eaten a spiritual meal, the Christian ordinances would not protect the Corinthians from divine judgment for sexual immorality despite their sacramental theology.

Paul also prohibited the Corinthians from putting the Lord to the test. He made his point by an allusion to the events in Numbers 21:4-7. The Israelites complained against God because they had to eat manna rather than ordinary food. The Israelites longed to taste the fleshpots of Egypt and turned their noses up at the food that God had provided for them. God punished the ingrates by sending hoards of venomous snakes to strike and kill them. In light of the language of 1 Corinthians 10:22, it appears that the Corinthians were putting Christ to the test by participation in the idolatrous feasts. Paul demanded, "Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?" Just as the sumptuous delicacies of Egypt were luring the Israelites back to Pharaoh's land, the lavish feasts held in the pagan temples of Corinth were luring church members back to idolatry. Paul, however, does not mince words. He warns that if baptism and a spiritual meal did not protect the Israelites from the wrath of God when they deem his provisions inadequate, the ordinances would not protect the Corinthian church members from divine wrath if they deemed God's provision insufficient and returned to pagan temples for their meals.

At first glance, 1 Corinthians 10:10 seems redundant, an unnecessary repetition of the command not to gripe about God's provision. However, a closer examination of the Old

¹⁴Some scholars reject this suggestion since Strabo's mention of 1000 temple prostitutes in the temple of Aphrodite predates the Pauline era. However, Josephus, a contemporary of Paul, mentions such activity in *Antiquities* 18:65-80. See the biblical evidence in Fee, *First Corinthians*, 455.

Testament background demonstrates that this grumbling is different from that mentioned in verse nine. This grumbling was not directed against God personally, but against his appointed leader. In Numbers 14 the people murmured against Moses and Aaron, and in that same chapter God promised that only Joshua and Caleb would enter the Promised Land. In Numbers 16 the people murmured against Moses and Aaron and 14,700 were killed by a plague.

The Corinthian readers would have immediately recognized the implications of the Old Testament narrative for themselves. 1 Corinthians 8 shows that some Corinthian church members had rejected Paul's apostleship and were refusing his right for financial support. First Corinthians 4:18-20 shows that some were challenging Paul's integrity. The Old Testament precedent issued a clear warning. If the baptism and spiritual meal received by the Israelites did not protect them from the wrath of God when they rebelled against the authority of his appointed leader, the Corinthians should be very cautious about rejecting Paul's apostolic authority and assuming that baptism and the Lord's Supper would protect them from punishment.

Conclusion

On the surface, some New Testament texts might seem to imply that baptism and the Lord's Supper effect salvation. However, all such texts must be interpreted in light of 1 Corinthians 10. First Corinthians is among the four *Hauptbriefe* and all but the most radical of scholars recognize that the epistle is an authentic Pauline letter. Furthermore, while some interpretive questions may remain, the primary point of the passage is abundantly clear: baptism and the Lord's Supper do not guarantee salvation or authorize believers to live sinfully presuming that the ordinances will protect them from divine wrath.¹⁵ If one follows the basic

¹⁵Conzelmann aptly commented: "The presence of Christ does not work in the manner of a natural charm. This means for the Christian that partaking of the sacrament does not confer a *character indelebilis*. The application

hermeneutical principle of interpreting more obscure texts in light of clearer texts, 1 Corinthians 10 serves to guide interpretation of more difficult texts related to baptism and the Lord's Supper and preclude sacramental interpretations of texts such as Romans 6:1-4 or Acts 2:38.

to the "strong" and to their combination of pneumatism and sacramentalism is obvious." See Conzelmann, *I Corinthians*, 167. Fee likewise commented: "The nature of this argument [1 Cor. 10:1-5] strongly suggests that those who 'think they stand' (v. 12) do so on the basis of a somewhat magical view of the sacraments. Otherwise one can scarcely make sense of the present paragraph." See Fee, *First Corinthians*, 443.