

Baptism and Communion



Grace Church Distinctives

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Table of Contents

Baptism	1
<i>What is it?</i>	1
<i>Why is it important?</i>	2
<i>What if I was “baptized” as an infant or by another mode (i.e. sprinkling)?</i>	3
<i>How old must a person be for baptism?</i>	4
<i>What if I am interested in being baptized?</i>	5
Communion	5
<i>What is it?</i>	5
<i>Why is it important?</i>	6
<i>Who is it for?</i>	7
<i>What does it mean to “partake in a worthy manner”?</i>	7
<i>May I participate if I have not been baptized?</i>	8
<i>Do I have to be a member of Grace Church to partake?</i>	8
<i>How often should we have communion?</i>	9
<i>Should I let my children partake?</i>	9
Summing it up	11

Baptism and Communion

At Grace Church, we believe that Jesus, before he ascended to heaven, gave the Church two ordinances to be practiced within the local church. These are baptism and communion. Each of these is full of meaning and provides a visual representation of the gospel.

Despite this reality there can often be confusion over these ordinances. This paper is to help clear up questions you may have and to set forth why and how we practice baptism and communion at Grace Church. We will approach this with some questions and answers on the subject.

Baptism

What is it?

Baptism is the act of immersing a person under water and then bringing him up out of the water. We do believe that immersion is the biblical mode of baptism. There are three reasons we believe this. First, the New Testament word *baptizo* means “to plunge, dip, immerse” something in water. Second, full immersion seems to be the New Testament pattern of baptism. We see people were baptized by John, “*in the river Jordan.*” They were *in* the river, not beside it (c.f. Mark 1:10, Acts 8:36-39). Third, the reality that baptism represents is best illustrated by immersion. Romans 6:3-4 shows that this ordinance symbolizes the spiritual reality of a believer’s union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (cf. Titus 3:5).

Another implication from Romans 6:3-4 is that baptism is only for those who are believers in Jesus Christ. It is intended to

visually portray the inward realities of a person's conversion. Therefore, the person receiving baptism must be one who has actually experienced these spiritual realities of being buried with Christ in his death and raised with him in his resurrection. This is also why we do not practice infant baptism.

So, baptism, the visual representation of the inward realities of conversion, is the immersion, in water, of a person who has been united to Christ (i.e. a Christian).

Why is it important?

It is important to start out by noting that baptism does not earn salvation or favor with God. This is made clear when the thief on the cross repented and trusted in Jesus. Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). This man did not have a chance to be baptized, yet he was still saved. A person's righteous standing is earned by the righteous life and atoning death of Jesus and is received by faith alone.

This is not to say that baptism is unimportant or does not matter to God. To the contrary, it is important for every believer to seek baptism for several reasons. The main one being that Jesus commanded it. In his final instructions to his followers before ascending, he said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit..." (Matt. 28:19). This is part of the great commission. The disciples (i.e. followers of Christ) were to be baptized (cf. Acts 2:38).

Another reason we believe baptism is not optional for the believer is that it is intended to be the way a new Christian identifies himself with the body of believers (this is one reason

we believe a person must be baptized before becoming a member of our local congregation). It is a public testimony to the fact that he is repenting of his sin, trusting in Jesus, and identifying with Christ (Mark 1:4-5, Matt. 28:19).

This identification with Christ and his body is a tremendous encouragement to the other Christians in the body. It pictures God's grace at work in another person, and this grace is something to which every Christian can relate.

This public identification with Christ also serves as a testimony to non-Christians of the gospel and its power. One practical way we seek to highlight this encouragement to Christians and gospel presentation to non-believers is to have each baptismal candidate share his testimony before being baptized.

What if I was "baptized" as an infant or by another mode (i.e. sprinkling)?

If you were sprinkled with water as a baby, this was not a true baptism. As we said above, baptism is something that is done to a believer. A baby is not capable of repenting and believing in Jesus. So, we would encourage you to pursue baptism (yes, even if you have been a Christian for many years). This is how you can demonstrate obedience to Christ, encourage other believers, and be a testimony to non-believers.

If you were sprinkled after becoming a believer, we will leave it up to your conscience. We do believe the biblical mode of baptism is immersion, but what is most important is that you were a believer at the time of your baptism. So, while we encourage you to pray about and consider being baptized by immersion, we will leave it up to your conscience before God.

You must determine if you believe your experience was a genuine baptism.

How old must a person be for baptism?

There is no age limit. The only requirement is that a person has been reborn and is trusting in Jesus alone for the forgiveness of his sins. This does, however, require that a person is old enough to understand the gospel. There is not a different gospel for children. A child must understand his sin, Jesus' perfect life, death, and resurrection on his behalf, and receive these truths by repentance and faith. He may communicate it on a child-like level, but he must be able to understand and embrace these realities.

It is worth noting that there is much to be gained by encouraging young children to wait for baptism instead of rushing them to the water. The primary reason is that if a child is not truly a believer he may look back on his baptism and assume he is truly saved and, therefore, be hardened to the gospel.

On the other hand, making him wait for a while longer can be a tremendous benefit. This provides an opportunity to see that the faith is genuine and not just an attempt to please his parents. Waiting allows for a time of testing to see gospel fruit in the child's life (Matt. 3:8, 7:16-18). The simple reality is that a child has not lived long enough as a Christian to face trials which prove one's faith (1 Peter 1:7).

So, when should a child get baptized? We recommend taking it slow. Tell your child you want to give him some time for his faith to be tested. In the mean time, affirm your child's

profession without giving him assurance he is saved (only God gives assurance to His children as they see Him working to produce love for Himself and obedience to His word). This can be done by statements such as, “I’m glad you believe in Jesus. Keep trusting Him and ask Him to help you continue to turn away from sin and walk in righteousness.” We encourage parents to be looking for proven faith. Also, we encourage you to ask others, maybe even a pastor, to help you in gauging these things.

What if I am interested in being baptized?

If you are interested in being baptized, contact one of our pastors to set up a meeting.

Communion

What is it?

Communion, or the Lord’s Supper, is a time when the congregation partakes of a cracker (“unleavened bread”) and grape juice (“wine”) as a reminder of our Lord’s death for our sins. The broken bread represents the body of Jesus which was given for us (Luke 22:19). The wine represents His blood which was poured out for the new covenant (Luke 22:20). Like baptism, this ordinance has a rich picture of the gospel for us. It is through Jesus’ sacrificial death, as a satisfaction of God’s wrath against our sins, that we have communion or a restored relationship with God (Rom 5:6-11).

Why is it important?

It is important because it was instituted by Jesus with his first followers (Matt. 26:26-29). When the Apostle Paul further expounded upon this act in his first letter to the Corinthians he included Jesus' saying, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me" (11:25). So, we have it initiated by Christ and commanded by Him for the church to help us reflect on His substitutionary death for our sins. In fact, 1 Corinthians 11:26 says that in communion we "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."

Another reason communion is important is that it pictures our participation in the benefits of Christ's death. As we eat the bread and drink the wine we show the spiritual reality that we have come to Him for our spiritual nourishment (John 6:53-57). We have eaten of His body and drunk of His blood (i.e. fully embraced His death for our sins).

Communion also reminds us of the unity we share, because of the work of Christ, as a family of believers. First Corinthians 10:16 says, "Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?". This bread and cup speaks to our unity with all other Christians who share in the body and blood of Christ. It is a "meal" for those who are related to one another in Christ. It is a family "meal."

Related to this is the future hope of which communion reminds us. It points to a future day in which all believers will sit around the table of God and enjoy this family "meal" in the presence of our Savior. This is indicated when Jesus said, "I will not drink of

the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes” (Luke 22:18).

It is important to note that communion is not a way that we receive merit with God. It is a means of grace in that it is a way by which God reminds us of what his Son did to redeem us. In as much as I am reminded of Christ’s work on my behalf, God is showing grace to me. However, I am not receiving favor with God or salvation by partaking in communion. It is Jesus’ righteous life and death for my sins that has secured my salvation and righteousness before God.

Who is it for?

As we mentioned above, it is a family “meal.” It is only for those who truly have communion with God through faith in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. During the communion service, we urge non-believers to trust Christ. We ask them to refrain from partaking of the elements if they choose not to believe.

We expect that the believers who partake have been baptized or are planning and desiring to be baptized as soon as possible. See the question, “May I participate if I have not been baptized?” for more details on this.

We also expect that the believers, who participate, partake in a worthy manner. Paul warns that “whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27).

What does it mean to “partake in a worthy manner”?

Paul goes on to say that each person “must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1

Cor. 11:28). The point is that each person must examine himself to see if there is any sin that he is refusing to confess and repent from. The point here is not that the believer is perfect or feels worthy to partake in communion. The point is that he recognizes sin and confesses it to the Lord. He is not holding on to sin, but is seeking to walk in fellowship with God.

May I participate if I have not been baptized?

The call to be baptized is a command from Jesus. So, in order to partake in communion a believer should not be avoiding this call or indifferent to it. He should desire to obey Christ if he is going to partake in communion in a worthy manner. Baptism, by what it symbolizes (i.e. conversion), marks the beginning of the Christian life. This is true even if it is received many years after becoming a Christian. Therefore, it makes sense that the ordinance of baptism should be received (or at least sought after) before a person begins partaking in the second ordinance, communion.

Do I have to be a member of Grace Church to partake?

No. However, if you are regularly attending Grace Church, ask yourself, "What is keeping me from becoming a member?" Perhaps there is a legitimate reason, but it may be that you are shirking the biblical call to be a part of your local congregation.

Is it possible that you want the benefits of being part of a church without the responsibilities of membership (like a spiritual hitch hiker who is using someone else's gas, vehicle maintenance, and other costs while not contributing)? To avoid, for unbiblical reasons, the call to be a part of the local body is to partake in communion in an unworthy manner. So,

you do not have to be a member, but we would encourage you to pick up the flier, “Why Church Membership,” and consider the importance of associating with a local church in a formal commitment.

How often should we have communion?

Unlike baptism, which is a one-time occurrence in the believer’s life, communion is to be experienced throughout the Christian life. However, the Bible does not specify how often. Jesus simply said, “...as often as you do this...” (1 Cor. 11:25).

At Grace Church, we have communion once a month (the first Sunday of every month during the morning worship service). We believe this is a good balance. If we practiced it more often (say, weekly), we believe it might become something we do by rote repetition instead of a meaningful experience. If we did it less frequently, we might not think often enough, as a congregation, about our sinfulness and the atoning work of Christ.

Should I let my children partake?

If your child is not a Christian they should not take part in communion. Remember, they do not come into this world “Christian.” Each person must understand the gospel and receive it by personal repentance and faith in Jesus. In fact, by withholding communion from your unbelieving child, you can better communicate the gospel message to him. You can tell them what communion represents and that it is only for those who have believed in that message. By keeping this high view of communion you are showing your children their need to be saved. On the other hand, if you let them partake when they are not believers you are communicating that this is nothing

more than a snack or that it is just some religious thing people do.

But what if my children are believers? As with baptism, there is wisdom in waiting. First, it is wise for them to wait to allow time to see if their profession of faith is a true faith. Allowing time for a child's faith to be tested and proven can avoid the confusion that comes if he partakes in communion while merely professing faith, without actually being converted. The child may simply assume he is a Christian because he takes communion and might never truly examine his faith to see if it is genuine.

By making your child wait a little while before baptism and communion, you can instill a level of excitement in his heart as he anticipates his baptism and then first communion. Each time there is a baptism or communion service try to make sure your child is present to observe it and then talk with him afterward about its meaning. Communicate the excitement that these ordinances instill in the Christian's heart.

To sum up, your child should not be allowed to participate in communion unless he is a believer in Jesus Christ. After he professes faith, we would encourage you to allow for a time of growth and testing before letting him be baptized and subsequently partake in communion (1 Peter 1:7). Use this time to encourage him in his profession of faith and to help him grow spiritually (See the comments under this same question in the baptism section for more details). Ask a pastor or Christian friend to help you as you evaluate the fruit produced in your child's life (Matt. 3:8, 7:16-18).

Summing it up

Baptism and communion are important practices of the local church. Both were given by Christ to his people to point them to the spiritual realities of the gospel. They are intended to encourage the believer and present the gospel to the non-believer. Our desire at Grace Church is to be biblical in our practice of the ordinances so that we might display the glory of God.

