

THE ORDINANCES: MOVING FROM MERE SYMBOLS TO MIGHTY SIGNS

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Listen to any discussion among Baptists about the meaning of the church ordinances and one quickly hears them described as ‘mere symbols’. This terminology is replete in Baptist literature over the last century. The “2000 Baptist Faith and Message” says baptism is “an act . . . symbolizing the believer’s faith” and the Lord’s Supper is “a symbolic act.”¹ E. Y. Mullins writes that truths are “symbolized in baptism” and the bread and wine “symbolizes” the body and blood of Christ.² W. A. Criswell writes that the ordinances are “symbols and visible representatives.”³ This concept of ‘mere symbols’ has crowded out almost all further thought among Baptists on their full meaning. Curtis W. Freeman reports of a preacher’s regular admonishment to his communicants, “Now, remember that this doesn’t mean anything. These are just symbols.”⁴ When joined with the modern age’s skeptical cynicism, this concept threatens to diminish the ordinances in Baptist minds from ‘mere symbols’ to ‘meaningless rituals’,

¹Southern Baptist Convention, “The Baptist Faith and Message: The 2000 Baptist Faith & Message, Article VII,” Southern Baptist Convention, accessed July 17, 2015, www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp.

²E. Y. Mullins, “Baptism” and “The Lord’s Supper,” In *Baptist Beliefs* (Louisville, KY: Baptist World Publishing, 1912), 68, 70.

³W.A. Criswell, *Criswell’s Guidebook for Pastors* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), 201.

⁴Curtis W. Freeman, “‘To Feed Upon by Faith’: Nourishment from the Lord’s Table,” in *Baptist Sacramentalism*, eds. Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Great Britain: Paternoster Press, 2003), 206.

which is far removed from the esteemed position these rites are given in the New Testament. It is also antithetical to the cherished affection given them by early Baptists. Therefore, without paying any feaſance towards, ſacramentaliſm, ſacerdotaliſm, or *ex opere operato* ſalvation, it would behoove Baptiſts to eſcape the theological dead-end of ‘mere ſymbols’ and re-consider the ordinances as ‘mighty ſigns’.

The Inadequacy of Mere Symbols

As precious few Baptiſts draw iſſue with the ſymbolic nature of the ordinances, the problem with the phrase, ‘mere ſymbol’, is in the definition of the word mere. The New Oxford American Dictionary gives the meaning as: “that is ſolely or no more or better than what is ſpecified.” We could paraphraſe this to ‘no more than’, reſulting in ordinances that are ‘no more than ſymbols’. This comes very cloſe to our preacher who ſaid they don’t mean anything! And here is where we run into difficulty, for the ordinances do mean ſomething, and they mean a great deal.

Baptiſts are iſiſtent to both baptiſm’s mode (immersion) and its recipients (believers), with the latter point being ſo emphasized than the denomination’s reaſon for being reſts on it. And ſince Baptiſts rightly place ſuch importance on baptiſm’s ſubjects, H. Wheeler Robiſon believes that “we ought to be able to ſhow that great and permanent principles are implied in it.”⁵ But, unfortunately, “Baptiſts have been remarkably poor at developing a theology of baptiſm . . . reſting content with developing

⁵H. Wheeler Robiſon, *Baptiſt Principles*, 4th ed. (London: The Carey Kingſgate Preſs, 1966), 16.

an account of proper administration of the rite.”⁶ Much the same could be said about the Lord’s Supper, with Baptists emphasizing practice over meaning. Baptists are much better at saying what the ordinances are *not* rather than what they mean.

So, what are the meanings of the ordinances? We can at least approach an answer by considering three sources: the confessions and writings of the early Baptists, the sermons of Charles Spurgeon, and the works of some twentieth-century Baptist theologians, principally British.

Early Baptist Thought on the Ordinances

Calvin’s influence on the early Particular Baptists makes his position a useful preface to early Baptist thinking. In his *Institutes* he explains that these acts “have been instituted by the Lord to the end that they may serve to establish and increase faith.”⁷ Today’s Baptists might object that this is not a Baptist text and Calvin goes too far towards sacramentalism. Yet this line of thinking, and more startling apprehensions of the ordinances, are common in seventeenth-century Baptist confessions.

Let us first note language that will feel very comfortable to contemporary Baptists. The first General Baptist 1611 Amsterdam confession, *A Declaration of Faith*, refers to both baptism and the Lord’s Supper as outward manifestations.⁸ The *First*

⁶Stephen R. Holmes, “The Baptist Vision of the Church,” in *Baptist Theology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 17, 2015), 90.

⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, 1559 ed., 4.14.9, quoted in *Baptist Sacramentalism*, eds. Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Great Britain: Paternoster Press, 2003), 90.

⁸Edward Bean Underhill, *Confessions of Faith, and Other Public Documents*

London Confession in 1646 referred to baptism as “a sign”.⁹ *An Orthodox Creed* of 1676 calls baptism “a sign” and says the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper “signify . . . the body and blood of Christ.”¹⁰ *The Second London Confession* of 1689 again calls baptism “a sign” and describes the Supper’s purpose as a “showing to all the world.”¹¹

Here we see that early Baptists comprehended the ordinances as accomplishing symbolic functions. Thus today’s symbolic concept has a sound foundation. But that word “mere” is where the problem arises as these early confessions talk about much more than imagery.

A Declaration of Faith teaches that Sunday assembly’s liturgy, including the ordinances, was for “worship of God” and “mutual edification.”¹² *The First London Confession* states that ordinances are for “practical enjoyment” that the saints “may be assured” of their “inheritance in the kingdom of God.”¹³ Article XVIII of this confession’s appendix strongly implies that ordinances are for the “edifying of those that are converted.”¹⁴ *An Orthodox Creed* says that the Lord Jesus instituted the Supper, in

Illustrative of the History of the Baptist Churches of England in the 17th Century (London: Haddon, Brothers, 1854), 7.

⁹ Ibid, 42.

¹⁰ Ibid, 147, 152.

¹¹ Ibid, 226-227.

¹² Ibid, 8.

¹³ Ibid, 39-40.

¹⁴ Ibid, 58.

part, for “spiritual nourishment and growth in him.”¹⁵ This language is replicated in *The Second London Confession*.¹⁶

These statements show that early Baptists also found a practical, functional, edifying component in the ordinances in addition to their symbolism. But their belief didn't stop there. The ordinances were also seen to work supernaturally. Although most of these confessions at least allude to spiritual benefits, two passages from *The Second London Confession*, referring to salvation and the Lord's Supper, put it bluntly:

The Grace of *Faith*, whereby the Elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the *Spirit of Christ*; in their hearts; and is ordinarily wrought by the Ministry of the Word; by which also, and by the administration of *Baptisme*, and the *Lord's Supper*, *Prayer* and other *Means* appointed of God, it is increased and strengthened (emphasis original).¹⁷

Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements . . . , do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually receive, and feed upon Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death; the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally, but spiritually present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.¹⁸

Many of today's Baptists would likely be shocked to discover such language in their heritage. But it was not shocking at all to seventeenth-century and even later Baptists. Hercules Collins, author of *An Orthodox Catechism* said that believers are “verily partakers of His Body and Blood through the working of the Holy Ghost.”¹⁹

¹⁵Ibid, 152.

¹⁶Ibid, 227.

¹⁷Ibid, 201.

¹⁸Ibid, 227.

¹⁹Michael A.G. Haykin, “‘His soul-refreshing presence’: The Lord's Supper in

William Kiffin wrote in his *A Sober Discourse* that “the Supper is a Spiritual participation of the Body and Blood of Christ by Faith.” Benjamin Keach said “there is a mystical Conveyance or Communication of all Christ’s blessed Merits to our souls through faith.”²⁰ Thomas Grantham wrote that in the Lord’s Supper we “feed upon by faith.”²¹ Lest there be any mistake, all of these men explicitly rejected both transubstantiation and *ex opere operato* functioning of the ordinances. The real and material elements used in baptism and the Supper were merely a physical place where the believer met the Holy Spirit in faith. But they also clearly saw the ordinances as both edifying and efficacious, and far more than mere symbols.

Spurgeon and the Ordinance of the Lord’s Supper

These early Baptist doctrines carried through the eighteenth century virtually unchanged. Although Baptists began modifying their positions afterwards, one very prominent Baptist pastor unashamedly continued in-step with the Baptist pioneers. That would be Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

Spurgeon found numerous practical aspects in the ordinances, especially the Lord’s Supper, seeing the rites as powerful proclamations of the gospel, noting that “there is no sermon like the Lord’s Supper.”²² He also found the Supper to be of

Calvinistic Baptist Thought and Experience in the ‘Long’ Eighteenth Century,” in *Baptist Sacramentalism*, eds. Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Great Britain: Paternoster Press, 2003), 181.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid, 196.

²²Peter Morden, “The Spirituality of C.H. Spurgeon 2 Maintaining

immense, personal, devotional value, stating, “I need to be . . . forcibly reminded . . . of my dear Lord and Master very often.”²³

Spurgeon rejected sacerdotalism and regarded the doctrine of transubstantiation with “horror” and “contempt.” But his concept of Christ at the Table fell much in line with Calvin’s, believing in the “real presence” of Christ.²⁴ Peter Morden explains Spurgeon’s doctrine as seeing Christ’s body present with the Father in heaven but spiritually present and tangible in the elements.²⁵ Explaining in his own words:

No power upon earth can henceforth take from me the piece of bread which I have just now eaten, it has gone where it will be made up into blood, and nerve, and muscle, and bone. . . . That drop of wine has coursed through my veins, and is part and parcel of my being. So he that takes Jesus by faith to be his Saviour . . . all the men on earth, and all the devils in hell, cannot extract Christ from him . . .²⁶

Spurgeon’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper is more developed than The Second London Confession’s, showing that he strongly supported the practical, edifying, and efficacious vision of the ordinances until at least the late nineteenth century. But few stood with him at the time and almost none afterward. What happened?

The Diminution of the Ordinances

Two historical movements played a role in the Baptist retreat from the rich heritage of the ordinances. One was the Age of Enlightenment with its skepticism

Communion: the Lord’s Supper,” *Baptistic Theologies* 4, no. 1 (2012): 27-50, 27.

²³Ibid, 29.

²⁴Ibid, 41.

²⁵Ibid, 42.

²⁶Ibid, 46.

towards all things supernatural. Michael Haykin observes that the Baptist movement away from the Calvinist “real presence” towards a Zwinglian memorial view began in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. He assigns much of the blame to John Sutcliff, a founder of the Baptist Missionary Society, who argued that Christ’s instruction to remember him in the Supper “implied his absence.” And, although Sutcliff fought indifference about the Supper, the philosophy behind his viewpoint led to much ambivalence.²⁷ Others have attributed the change in viewpoints to a Baptist reaction against the Oxford Movement, with its implicit and explicit proclamations of salvific and regenerative grace in the ordinances.²⁸ Baptists fled from this heresy towards the memorial view of the supper. They also began emphasizing the loyalty aspects of baptism and the Supper as obedience to the Lord’s commands and as public testimonies of faith, leading to their portrayal as ‘merely’ ordinances. R.E.O. White laments that reducing baptism to “an announcement to the congregation and to God that we have decided that the gospel is true, is a gross betrayal of all that the New Testament says about baptism.”²⁹

Towards a Recovery

As we’ve observed the rise and decline of the Baptist doctrine of the

²⁷Haykin, 188-190.

²⁸Anthony R. Cross, “The Holy Spirit: The Key to the Baptismal Sacramentalism of H. Wheeler Robinson,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 36, no. 1-2 (Winter/Spring 2001): 176.

²⁹Stanley J. Grenz, “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as Community Acts: Toward a Sacramental Understanding of the Ordinances,” in *Baptist Sacramentalism*, eds. Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Great Britain: Paternoster Press, 2003), 83.

ordinances mostly among the British, we'll find most of the subsequent recovery effort on England as well. A key early twentieth-century pioneer in this movement was H. Wheeler Robinson. He has been followed, among others, by George R. Beasley-Murray, R.E.O. White, and, of late, Paul Fiddes.³⁰ These men have contributed "important, detailed and eloquent examinations" but "their impact has been limited," mostly because they "have not been read" or "not understood, or . . . ignored."³¹

What are some of the contributions of these men? Here is a sampling:

One contribution has been to identify the nature of the problem. Beasley-Murray says, "For too long we have been . . . unable to supply a coherent account from the Scriptures of what that baptism is that must be administered to the right persons."³²

H. Wheeler Robinson closely links the ordinances with the Holy Spirit's activity. In regards to baptism, he notes the frequent scriptural synchronicity of baptism with the gift of the Holy Spirit. He doesn't think this is a coincidence. In fact, he says, "when we speak of Believers' Baptism, we mean that baptism in the Spirit of God, of which water baptism is the expression."³³ Robinson explains the linkage: "we are pleading for the connection of water-baptism with the Holy Spirit exactly in the sense in which we plead for its connection with personal faith. . . . that faith is not a mere opinion, but a personal surrender to Him through whose Spirit these powers are to be experienced,

³⁰Cross, "The Holy Spirit", 186.

³¹Anthony R. Cross, "Faith-Baptism: The Key to an Evangelical Sacramentalism," *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 4, no. 3: 5.

³²Cross, "Faith-Baptism," 5.

³³Robinson, 25.

and . . . that faith is answered by the Holy Spirit of God.”³⁴

Beasley-Murray saw baptism and conversion as nearly synonymous. He comes perilously close to describing baptism as salvific but points out a key issue in our tendency to chronologically displace belief and baptism. He says, “The New Testament knows nothing of postponing a baptism after conversion.” Cross describes Beasley-Murray’s position as “conversion-baptism”, so indissolubly linked in the New Testament as to be a unity, and warns that as Paedobaptists err by putting baptism before conversion, Baptists may err by putting baptism years, and even decades, after conversion.³⁵

Conclusion

We need not agree with the British Baptists about the exact meaning of the ordinances to comprehend that the ‘mere symbol’ doctrine is anemic. It is plain that we are missing much of what early Baptists saw in the water and the table. How should we proceed from here? Let’s begin with a comparison.

As Christians and Baptists, do we believe that Christ is among us whenever two or more are gathered in his name? We do. Do we believe that the Holy Spirit carries our prayers sincerely offered in Jesus’ name to the throne of the Father? We do. Do we believe that the Holy Spirit illuminates and animates the Word of God when we read the scriptures? We do. Do we believe that the Holy Spirit ministers to our minds and hearts when we hear the Word preached? We do. Do we believe that the Word rises up in us to

³⁴Cross, “The Holy Spirit,” 181.

³⁵Cross, “Faith-Baptism,” 7-8.

produce spiritual fruit when we obey it? We do. Do we believe that Jesus carries our praises before the heavenly altar? We do. All these are spiritual phenomena mediated through the material world, yet we don't fear that believing and teaching such doctrines will lead us into heresy. Why then shouldn't we believe that Christ is among us when we remember his passion? Why shouldn't we believe that the Holy Spirit ministers to our souls when we preach the gospel to our lips with the bread and wine? Why shouldn't we believe that we receive spiritual blessings when we obey the Lord and unite ourselves with him under the water, or when we behold his death, burial, and resurrection in baptism? We should; there is no reason not to. We need not take one step towards sacramentalism to own the scripturally endorsed spiritual blessings of the ordinances. And if we do own them we are no less, but rather more, Baptist for doing so. Let us dispense with our "mere symbols" and boldly own the "mighty signs" of our faith.

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