

Water Baptism and Communion: Two ordinances, three tenses

By [Earl Creps](#)

Editor's note: This is the fifth in a series of eight monthly articles on the 16 Foundational Truths of the Assemblies of God, written by faculty of Assemblies of God Theological Seminary.

"The ordinance of baptism by immersion is commanded by the Scriptures. All who repent and believe on Christ as Savior and Lord are to be baptized. Thus they declare to the world that they have died with Christ and that they also have been raised with Him to walk in newness of life."

"The Lord's Supper, consisting of the elements – bread and the fruit of the vine – is the symbol expressing our sharing the divine nature of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:4), a memorial of His suffering and death (1 Corinthians 11:26) and a prophecy of His second coming (1 Corinthians 11:26) and is enjoined on all believers "till He come!"

Biblical Christianity is surprisingly simple. When distilled to its essence, the teachings of Jesus involve virtually none of the ceremonies, rituals or other features usually associated with religions. Yet Jesus did leave us with ordinances, concrete ways of connecting with His person and with other believers. Water baptism and Communion are the two ordinances practiced by the Assemblies of God. Neither makes us a Christian, but both tell us what it means to be one.

Water baptism: buried and raised with Christ

While Jesus himself did not baptize anyone, He immediately delegated this responsibility to His followers (John 4:2) who continued the practice under His direction (Mathew 28:19) as a way of initiating new believers into the faith (Acts 2:41). For 2,000 years followers of Jesus have made three powerful statements in the act of water baptism – one past, one present and one future.

Past tense: I have chosen. At various times in history, misguided Christians have attempted to coerce others into baptism as a way of forcing them into their religion. These campaigns hardly accomplished Jesus' original mission for the church to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19, NIV). Obviously, being a "disciple" is meant to come first, and that by free choice. An Ethiopian who came to faith by way of Philip's witness asked him, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" (Acts 8:36).

This is the attitude that baptism represents: a desire to announce that I have

chosen to follow Christ. The Assemblies of God endorses water baptism of those believers who are old enough to understand the experience. Understanding is needed in order to fulfill the biblical emphasis on voluntary choice and saving faith.

Present tense: I can identify. Baptism is a way of telling the world that I identify with Jesus in every respect. When a believer enters the water, he or she is being "buried with [Christ] in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:12). In this sense, every baptism is a funeral for the old self, a way of saying that sin and death no longer own me, "because anyone who has died has been freed from sin" (Romans 6:6,7). But it is much more. The grave could not hold Jesus any more than the water can hold us. At Christ's return, the grave will be unable to hold us as well (Romans 8:11).

Christ's death and resurrection are the great universals of the Christian faith, accessible to anyone who believes. Despite some differences in theology and method, all Christian traditions practice water baptism in some form, telling the world that their faith is not a set of beliefs, but a life lived out in Christ. The Assemblies of God practices water baptism by immersion to reinforce the symbolism of burial and resurrection and to reflect the practice as found in the New Testament.

Future tense: I will be faithful. Scripture records baptisms taking place in public settings. Since church buildings were not used until the third century A.D., the public nature of the ordinance most likely persisted for generations. Thus, to be baptized as a Christian in a largely pagan culture was to make a very public statement of total commitment to Christ, and to face the consequences of that commitment.

Public baptism makes it impossible for Christians to practice a "secret" faith concealed from a possibly hostile world. A baptismal service, especially when accompanied by the new believer's retelling of his or her spiritual journey, is a powerful witness to the risen Christ and a statement of commitment to the Savior that cannot be retracted. It is a way of saying that I have counted the cost and decided to serve God with all my heart (Luke 14:25-33).

The Assemblies of God follows the historic Christian practice of baptizing "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). In addition to being Jesus' only instruction on the matter, this wording reflects the triune God's total commitment to the believer. The Father's love sent the Son to the cross. The Father and the Son sent the Spirit upon the church (Matthew 3:11; John 15:26).

Communion: the Lord's table

Some Christian traditions refer to Communion as the "Eucharist," however, the wording used is much less important than the recognition that "the Lord's supper"

(1 Corinthians 11:20) takes place at "the Lord's table" (1 Corinthians 10:21). The original language here is quite emphatic; this experience belongs to God.

Jesus modeled the Communion moment at a Passover meal that would eventually be called the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26-28). The common label is incorrect. This was really the first supper, the beginning of two millennia of believers celebrating Christ's presence among them. Three truths present themselves every time we meet with the Lord around His table.

Past tense: a table of history. The Lord's table recognizes the historical reality of Jesus' sacrifice. Of the bread, Jesus said, "This is My body which is broken for you." Of the cup, He said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood" (1 Corinthians 11:24,25, NKJV). Rather than being a hollow ritual about Christ, the Lord's Supper commemorates what He has actually done for our forgiveness and reconciliation with the Father.

In water baptism, we individually identify with Christ's death and resurrection. But at the Lord's table, the entire community focuses on the Cross and the empty tomb. In this act, the history of redemption is affirmed by the congregation, and the congregation is affirmed by the Agent of that history. As Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of Me" (1 Corinthians 11:24,25). Assemblies of God churches serve Communion frequently in order to bond the congregation together around the central reality of Christianity: the Cross.

Present tense: a table of accountability. One purpose of the Communion experience is to call participants to a moment of accountability before the Lord. Paul addressed the church at Corinth on this issue. The congregation was fractured by competing loyalties and was displaying grotesque moral and relational failures. Even the regular fellowship meals, and the following Communion services, were coming to resemble the feasts held in local pagan temples (1 Corinthians 11:18-22).

The Corinthians needed to "examine" themselves: "For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Corinthians 11:29, NIV). This injunction means that the blessing of Communion is not only neutralized, but reversed, when the Lord's table (and the sacrifice and community it represents) is treated with disrespect. There is no benefit in the bread and cup for Christians who choose to live in flagrant disobedience before coming to the table.

Assemblies of God churches tend to take a sober attitude while serving Communion, providing opportunity for members to consider the quality of their lives and make things right with God and with others.

Future tense: a table of prophecy. Communion is temporary. One day the

ordinance will be replaced permanently by fellowship among Christ and His people in eternity (Revelation 19:9). Jesus spoke of this when He told the Twelve at their final Passover meal, "I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29).

Every time the church celebrates Communion, then, we "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes"

(1 Corinthians 11:26). Coming to the Lord's table is a way of recognizing that the future will not be an endless extension of the present. Christ is coming for His church. The bread and the cup foreshadow the real Last Supper, the one that will never end.

Ordinances are visible representations of invisible realities. We are water baptized to signify our entry into the kingdom of God through identification with Christ in His death and resurrection. We come to the Lord's table to remember the present reality of the Cross, to make our lives accountable to God, and to look forward to Christ's return. As we participate in the ordinances, we connect both to God and to His people.

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