

## ***Growing in Christ***

### ***The Church: Rites and Rituals***

Lesson #9 for December 1, 2012

Scriptures: Matthew 28:19,20; Romans 6:3-8; John 13:1-17; Matthew 26:26-28; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

1. This lesson will focus on three of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's ordinances: baptism, the Lord's Supper, and foot-washing. What is the role or purpose of rites or rituals? Do they have an important place in the church's activities? What does baptism mean to you? What does the Lord's Supper mean to you?
2. Read John 6:43-59. In the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Christians were accused of being cannibals because of these verses. What is implied by "eating the flesh and drinking the blood" of Jesus? In the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, we partake of a small wafer made of wheat and some fresh grape juice. The Roman Catholic Church teaches a doctrine known as transubstantiation. In Greek it is *metousiosis*. They believe that when the priest takes the Eucharist each Sunday, the substance of the wheat bread and grape wine literally changes into the substance of the body and blood of Jesus. They admit that one cannot tell that by any tasting, smelling, looking, or touching; but, they say it still remains true.
3. In his evaluation of this doctrine, Martin Luther denied that idea and said that *transubstantiation* does not occur. He said that in carrying out a ritual ceremony, human beings cannot turn simple substances into God. That would be creating God! So, he recommended a different approach called *consubstantiation* in which he taught that as one eats the bread and the grape juice, s/he is taking the body and blood of Jesus with it. What actually happens when we partake of the Lord's Supper? Why do we participate in it? Are we taking the Lord into our bodies? Do we believe "you are what you eat"?
4. Let us review some basic ideas. Many societies have initiation rites or rituals sometimes called rites of passage. Some of those rights can be very gruesome, painful, or scary; but they are supposed to prepare children to enter into life as adults. Hopefully, they learn something that will help them to deal with the challenges of adult society.
5. The church also has certain rituals or rites to symbolize certain things. Remember that symbols like words are used because they have a pointing function. That is, we use the word to symbolize an idea. The church's rituals are to symbolize certain ideas.
6. In the very early days of Christianity in the eastern part of the Mediterranean region, they practiced these rituals given by Christ. In Greek they referred to them as the *mysterion* or "mystery." By contrast, in the western part of the Mediterranean world, these rituals came to be known as sacraments. A sacrament was an oath that a Roman soldier took declaring his allegiance to the commander. In the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church settled on seven sacraments which they believed the Christian must go through and which would, in actual fact, bestow power on the Christian himself. The seven sacraments were: baptism, confirmation, anointing of the sick, the holy Eucharist, penance or reconciliation, holy orders, and matrimony.
7. Most of these sacraments are fairly well understood by Christians at least in the developed countries. It might be useful to describe penance or reconciliation as the Roman Catholic Church practices it. Penance involves four elements: 1) Contrition or repentance. It is assumed that the penitent one is sincerely sorry for the wrongdoing or sin which he has committed and, therefore, has sincerely repented. 2) He then confesses his wrong to the

priest who has been officially approved to hear confessions. Catholics admit that on occasion it may be useful to confess one's sins to one another as the Bible recommends, (James 5:16) but that only a priest has the power to administer this sacrament. 3) Absolution by the priest. And 4) Satisfaction or penance. Thus, the priest has the authority to forgive a person of his/her sins and to make everything right. But, the Bible says that only God can forgive sins. (Mark 2:1-12; Micah 7:18; contrast John 20:23; Matthew 18:21,22)

8. As Seventh-day Adventists, we do not believe in the sacraments. We do believe that Christ has ordained or given us certain rites or rituals that He has asked us to practice as we look forward to the second coming. These ordained rituals we have called ordinances.
9. What has Christ asked us to do? Read Matthew 28:19,20; John 13:14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. We are told to "Go, make disciples, baptize, and teach" in order to spread the gospel to all parts of the world. Earlier, in the upper room, we were admonished to follow the example that Jesus gave to His disciples to wash one another's feet and to drink the wine and eat the bread commemorating Christ's death. We do not believe that we somehow gain merit by performing these acts. They are simply supposed to be reminders of what Christ has done for us. They are outward symbols of some very important events which happened in history and which are supposed to be reflected in our lives. What happens to food in our bodies? At least a portion of it becomes a part of us. Is that what is supposed to happen spiritually?
10. Consider baptism. Read Acts 2:38,41,47; 1 Corinthians 12:13. These verses suggest that baptism is supposed to represent a turning away from sin through repentance and receiving forgiveness, entering into the new birth experience and receiving the Holy Spirit. Based on these facts, it became the entrance requirement for membership into the church. What does it mean to be baptized into the one Spirit? On Pentecostal Sunday, three thousand were baptized. Were they baptized by the Spirit or in water? What is the baptism of the Spirit?
11. A number of modern Christian groups have given up the idea of baptism by immersion. The Roman Catholic Church administers baptism by sprinkling—preferably to newborn babies. They teach that without this baptism, it is impossible to be saved. While sprinkling has been carried out for hundreds of years, many biblical scholars have recognized that there is no basis in Scripture for it. The Church of England decided some time ago that "the recipients of Baptism were normally adults and not infants; and it must be admitted that there is no conclusive evidence in the New Testament for the Baptism of infants."—*Baptism and Confirmation Today* (London: SCM, 1955) page 34. If, in fact, baptism is to follow a sincere understanding of one's sins followed by repentance and a change of attitude toward God, this would be impossible for an infant. How could an infant make a commitment to anyone?
12. Once again, notice that if you believe baptism is a sacrament and a way of gaining favor in God's eyes by bringing about a transformation in a person from spiritual death to life, it is entirely a supernatural event done by God and does not involve any understanding or change on the part of the individual. However, those of us who believe that baptism is an ordinance given by Jesus, see it as a symbol of a supernatural event. That is, the believer has come to understand that he is a sinner, that he needs to change, and he accepts the life and death of Jesus on his behalf.
13. When did foot washing first appear in the Scriptures? Abraham offered to wash the feet of Jesus and His angel friends in Genesis 18:4. Lot offered to wash the feet of the same angels in Genesis 19:2. In Genesis 24:32, Laban and Rebekah offered to wash the feet of Abraham's servant. God instructed the priests and Levites to regularly wash their hands and feet as they carried out their sacred responsibilities. In all of these examples, it seems clear that the purpose of the foot washing and/or hand washing was a matter of cleanliness as well as ritual.

14. What is the ordinance of humility? Read Luke 22:24-27 and Matthew 18:1; 20:21. Incredible as it may seem, on their way into the upper room—or perhaps even while in the upper room—the disciples were quietly arguing among themselves about who was the greatest! Try to imagine how Jesus felt as He saw them arguing among themselves! He wondered what He could do to change their attitude. And as we know, He did something incredible. The upper room had been prepared. There was a pitcher full of water and a basin. But, none of the disciples moved to wash anyone else's feet. Eventually, Jesus stood up, took off His outer garment, picked up the pitcher and the basin, and began to wash His disciples' feet.
15. Read John 13:1-17. Why do you think John is the only Gospel writer who tells this story? It was written long after the Jewish nation was destroyed, and there was no hope left for national greatness. No doubt, in Jesus' day, the feet of the disciples were quite dirty and seriously needed cleaning. Jesus gave the ultimate example of servant-leadership by kneeling down and washing the disciples' feet. What does that say to us about God? Do you think the Father would have done what Jesus did?  
  

Had God the Father come to our world and dwelt among us, humbling Himself, veiling His glory, that humanity might look upon Him, the history that we have of the life of Christ would not have been changed in unfolding its record of His own condescending grace. In every act of Jesus, in every lesson of His instruction, we are to see and hear and recognize God. In sight, in hearing, in effect, it is the voice and movements of the Father. (*Letter 83*, 1895; *TMK* 338.4; *21MR* 393.1)
16. The disciples must have been shocked at first. Ultimately, most of them were humbled. Judas was disgusted. How could someone that he was planning to force into the position of king of the Jews be down on His knees washing dirty feet! Could this be the supreme Sovereign of the universe, the Creator of all things, kneeling down and washing dirty feet?
17. After washing those dirty feet, Jesus returned to the table to lead out in the service. Did Jesus have to wash His own feet? Did one of the disciples offer to wash Jesus' feet?
18. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is one of only a very small group of Christian denominations still practicing actual foot washing. Has that become an outmoded ritual? We do not walk around in sandals on dusty streets anymore. Does that make it not meaningful?
19. What does the Lord's Supper mean to you? Whereas circumcision was supposed to be a sign of a Jewish male's allegiance to his religion throughout his life, in Christian times baptism is supposed to represent our entrance into the Christian life. The Lord's Supper is supposed to represent the renewing of that commitment on a regular basis. Just as the Passover represented the liberation from Egyptian bondage for the Jewish people under the old covenant, the Lord's Supper represents our liberation from the old life of sin and its consequence, death. (Romans 6:23)
20. The food that we eat is digested and processed and changed until it can become an integral part of our body or be used to provide the necessary energy to stay alive.
21. Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. As we eat and drink of the Lord's Supper, we are symbolizing the idea that through the church and its rites and rituals we have accepted the teachings and life of Jesus and that we plan to make it an integral part of our lives. Baptism and the Lord's Supper—it's an extension over time—remind us that we are part of a sinful but joyous Christian community, very thankful for what Christ has done for us.
22. Read 1 Corinthians 11:26. In this verse Paul suggested that the ordinance of the Lord's Supper is not just to look back over our lives and ask for forgiveness for our post-baptismal

sins. It is much more than that. It is supposed to help us look forward to the second coming of Christ. During that interval while we are waiting, we are proclaiming the truth of all that Jesus accomplished by His life and His death.

23. What is the relationship between the first coming and all that Christ did at that time and the second coming? If Jesus did not plan to come back the second time, what was accomplished by His first coming? The Lord's Supper should at least in part help us to understand the relationship between the first and the second comings. Jesus Himself suggested that in Matthew 26:29. He promised a close and personal relationship with us, saying that He would not drink of the grape juice until He drinks it again with us. He is looking forward to the day when we can all gather around the table in heaven and together enjoy the perfect grape juice of heaven.
24. So, what does the cross mean to you? How does your understanding of the meaning of the cross help to prepare you for the second coming?

The passover pointed backward to the deliverance of the children of Israel, and was also typical, pointing forward to Christ, the Lamb of God, slain for the redemption of fallen man. The blood sprinkled upon the door-posts prefigured the atoning blood of Christ, and also the continual dependence of sinful man upon the merits of that blood for safety from the power of Satan, and for final redemption.—Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, p. 201.1.

25. Even some modern groups such as some members of Islam have accused Christians of practicing cannibalism. Read John 6:53-56. How would you respond to such a charge? Do you clearly understand the reason why Jesus said what He did and what it is supposed to mean for us today?
26. Think back to the time when you were baptized. Was it a time of serious Christian commitment? Do you think of that occasion every time you participate in the ordinance of humility and the ordinance of the Lord's Supper? Do we as Christians need very concrete examples like this to remind us of these important teachings? Why do you think Jesus gave us these rituals?
27. Virtually every organization has a list of rituals. Even nations have national holidays. Individuals have their birthdays. Why do we have those rituals? They symbolize something which is important to us. They remind us of the past and hopefully encourage us to look forward to the future.
28. Meals taken together have had special meaning to virtually all groups and societies down through history. Very often, a meal taken together is the high point of some ceremony or ritual. Meals are associated with every one of the sacraments as well as the ordinances. Is that why Jesus gave us the bread and grape juice as a part of our renewing our commitment to Christianity and to Him on a regular basis?
29. Having once again studied these rites and rituals, how do you feel about them? Would you be just as happy if the church dropped them? Have they been of any long-term benefit to you in your Christian walk? Could you suggest any better ways for the church to celebrate its community, its acceptance of new members, and its allegiance and commitment to Christ?

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