

Healthy Church
Session Seven: The Ordinances of the Church
Commentary

Matthew 3:13-17

3:13–15. When we last saw Jesus at the end of Matthew 2, he was still a child, settling into the home of his upbringing in Nazareth. The placement of Jesus' name and the connecting word then immediately following John's description of the Messiah's ministry of judgment (and salvation) identifies Jesus as that very same Messiah, judge, and Savior. It also indicates that the messianic era characterized by judgment and salvation is now beginning, even as we watch Jesus walk up to John in the River Jordan.

To this point, Jesus has spent his nearly three decades of earthly life in quiet obscurity. Galilee was the backwater of Israel, so Matthew's choice of wording here implies a "coming out," and a readiness to begin public ministry.

The need for Jesus to be baptized, and thereby to serve as our representative and model, was not optional for him. It was important to the fulfillment of his mission on earth, in identifying with the "righteous remnant" of Israel. He said it was a necessary step in order to fulfill all righteousness (3:15). So Jesus' baptism was unique. It was not a "baptism of repentance" (as John's was) nor was it a "Christian baptism" (as ours is today). But it was an identifying step of obedience at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus would not have been fully obedient if he had bypassed this step that seemed to John to be unnecessary for the Holy One (3:14).

3:16–17. When Jesus came up out of the water from being baptized by John, he received an immediate confirmation from his family. He saw the Spirit of God, and he heard his Father's approval. It was like having your family come and cheer for you at your graduation.

This scene is something like a family reunion—all three members of the Trinity manifesting their presence in such a way that bystanders could see or hear them. This was a testimony to human witnesses about the identity of Jesus, the Messiah. It serves as one of hundreds of exhibits in Matthew's Gospel for Jesus as the Messiah.

It was also a personal affirmation from the first and third members of the Trinity to the Son. This fact reminds us of the emotional-relational side of the Godhead, a side we often forget. Even God the Son enjoyed personal affirmation from his family. And certainly the people needed to hear from the Father (cf. John 11:42).

Twice in Matthew the Father speaks from heaven. In both cases he speaks in third person, addressing listeners other than Jesus (compare the second-person "you are" in Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; and the third-person "this is" in Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35). The second instance is in Matthew 17, on the Mount of Transfiguration. The wording in this warm, fatherly statement is reminiscent of the threefold emphasis on Isaac's uniqueness and value to Abraham in Genesis

22:2. There has never been, nor will there ever be, a prouder father in all the universe than God the Father.¹

Matthew 26:26-30

26:26. John was the only gospel writer who recorded Judas's departure from the meal (John 13:30). Apparently Judas's presence at the Lord's Supper was not an important detail to Matthew. He wanted to focus our attention on the Supper.

Jesus' comment, Take and eat; this is my body, must have caused a stir among the disciples. Matthew did not record Jesus' further elaboration on the significance of the bread, but the symbolism of sacrificial provision was unmistakable. This new rite had direct links with all of redemption history. Just as Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt was remembered in the Passover, so all of Messiah's people were to remember his death in this communion ordinance.

26:27–29. At one point in the meal, Jesus took the cup of wine, again gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples, commanding them, Drink from it, all of you. On this occasion, Jesus shocked the disciples by breaking the order of the centuries-long liturgy and offering the cup of his own blood. Thus, Jesus rendered the earlier Passover ceremonial meals obsolete and introduced a brand-new ceremony, the communion. But his further explanation must have surprised them: This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (27:28). The disciples had witnessed the pouring of an animal's blood on the temple altar as the required Mosaic sacrifice for the sins of Israel (e.g., Lev. 4:7, 18, 25, 30, 34). But Jesus introduced something new to their understanding. It would no longer be an animal's blood that would cover sins, but his blood—the blood of the Messiah-King. The blood of animals sealed the old covenant between Yahweh and his people (Exod. 24:8; Zech. 9:11). The blood of the Messiah would seal the new covenant (Matt. 1:1–17, 21; Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:25–27; Heb. 7–10).

Jesus concluded the institution of the ordinance with a solemn affirmation (I tell you), vowing not to celebrate this symbolic meal until the eschatological feast with you in my Father's kingdom (26:29). This verse anticipates Christ's future reign on the throne of David. We are commanded to celebrate this meal regularly on earth to remember what Jesus has done for us. But he will take part in it again when he can celebrate the final reunion with all his people. This reality emphasizes the symbolism of unity when we celebrate communion together as members of his body.

We feel this same sense of anticipation as we wait for our adult children to arrive "home for the holidays." We can imagine the heart of the king waiting for the ingathering of his entire family before participating again in the meal himself. It has been anticipated nearly two thousand years now by our reckoning. Imagine how long it has been in the reckoning of the Father's heart! What a grand family meal it will be!

¹ Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

Judas's treachery had already been revealed. But Jesus then told the remaining eleven disciples that they would also become disloyal, though not to the point of betraying him to his enemies. Jesus' careful delineation of these events was one more indication that he was not a blind victim. His was a sovereign and voluntary sacrifice.

26:30–32. Jesus and his disciples sang the last of the Hallel (probably Pss. 115–118). When Jesus and the eleven were finished with the meal, they went out of Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives. This path was familiar, as they seemed to have spent the nights of this week with friends in Bethany, on the other side of the Mount. But this time Jesus stopped on the Mount, not continuing to climb on toward Bethany.

Despite all Jesus' warnings and predictions, the disciples still did not understand what the next twenty-four hours held for them or their master. Jesus told the eleven that all of them would fall away. The reason would be on account of me—because of their association with him and the danger that would befall them. This very night is emphatic. There was no doubt, and their failure would come sooner than they realized.

Jesus explained that their abandonment would be a fulfillment of Zechariah 13:7. Jesus was foretelling the suffering he was about to undergo. While he remained faithful and endured, his disciples, like shepherdless sheep, would be scattered in fear.

The word *But* introduces the contrasting note of hope (26:32). Jesus once again foretold his resurrection, adding for the first time a glimpse into the days after he would be raised. *I will go ahead of you into Galilee* suggested that they were to meet him there after his resurrection. Of course, the disciples did not know enough at the time of Jesus' death to go on to Galilee. In fact, the Lord did not want them to go before they had proof of his resurrection—the empty tomb. At that time he would remind them of his instructions (28:7, 10).

After spending most of three years in the Galilean ministry, there was a warm ring of familiarity to the name Galilee, almost as though they would be going home for a final meeting before his ascension. The Messiah spent most of his ministry out of the spotlight in the geographical backwater, emerging into the spotlight only when the time was right and only when he would accomplish his greatest work. His short postresurrection period on earth would also be spent out of the spotlight. His last appearances would be reserved primarily for those who were already his followers.²

Acts 2:41-47

2:40–41. Luke hastens to tell us we do not have the entire sermon recorded in his book. Peter spoke many other words and pleaded with his hearers who responded. That day God added three thousand people to the small number of believers already serving as Christ's witnesses. But wait. Don't miss the importance of what Luke does not say. This time there was no sound, no flame, and no foreign language. These people received the Holy Spirit because that's what

² Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

Peter promised in Jesus' name. Pentecost was a one-time event, with only a mild echo or two appearing elsewhere during the first century.

Are we to believe that Peter baptized three thousand people on that one day? Of course not. The Bible knows no hierarchical system whereby people must be baptized at the hand of some official or titled clergy. We should probably assume all 120 believers assisted in this magnificent demonstration.

In the space of just a few verses, we see what happens when people trust Christ for salvation. First, they must recognize their need; then, they must receive God's gift; and finally, they must obey the message.

2:42. At various times in Acts, especially in the early chapters, Luke gives summary reports of how the church is doing. Here we have the first. In it our author describes what a biblical church really looks like, not only in the first century, but in every century from the Lord's ascension until his second coming.

A biblical church is marked by teaching. Thousands of new converts needed to understand precisely how Peter linked Old Testament text with the ministry of Jesus. Theologians call it "Messianic Christology". It became the core of New Testament doctrine.

Furthermore, the new Christians engaged in fellowship. Someone called the church "the colony of heaven." Here the believers fulfilled the words the Lord gave his disciples just before the crucifixion: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35).

Then the believers joined in breaking bread—Luke's term for what Paul calls "the Lord's Supper." Quite possibly they practiced it differently than many churches do now, likely with a full meal. Still, the memorial to the Lord's death until he comes again remains the central theme of believers breaking bread together. Quite likely, the phrase also describes Christians fellowshiping together at meal time.

Their worship also included prayer, in our text literally, "the prayers." New prayers and old. Probably public and private.

2:43–45. In addition to their worship, these believers became actively involved in the work of the Lord. Luke uses the same language to describe the apostles that he used of Jesus in 2:22. The miracles showed evidence of a new era. God gave miracles when Moses brought down the law and when Elijah and other prophets thundered a new message across Israel. "Miracles" does not appear in Acts after chapter 15, even though God continued to do miracles beyond that point.

Their work also included learning how to live and love together. They sold their possessions and made sure everybody had plenty. Communism? Absolutely not—this was voluntary, contemporary, and discretionary.

2:46–47. The early church was marked by faithful attendance—meeting together daily in the temple courts. They prayed, gave, ate, and rejoiced together. They practiced the presence of Jesus—still a good idea for his people. Luke makes good use of the Greek word *homothumadon*, translated together, applying it in 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; and 5:12.

Their witness included a demonstration of hospitality. No home would be large enough to house even a small group of believers for a short time, so they literally went house to house. Luke wants us to see how good it was—they enjoyed favor with the people. Not the Sanhedrin, but common folks all around the city. Witnessing may be the main theme in Acts, but praising certainly represents a secondary strain common in Luke's writings (the word *ainountes* is used nine times in the New Testament, seven by Luke). What happens to believers who worship, work, and witness for their Lord? The Lord grows the church. Let's not miss the order—first godly relationships with each other, then growth.³

³ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998).