

Biblical Ordinances and Visible Signs: How Baptists Weakened Biblical Authority by Limiting Ordinances to Two

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Modern Baptists frequently claim that a key Baptists distinctive is the conviction that the church has been given only two ordinances—baptism and the Lord’s Supper.² The *Baptist Faith and Message* (2000), the confessional statement of the Southern Baptist Convention, for example, describes a New Testament Church as a “congregation of baptized believers” that, among other things, observes “the two ordinances of Christ,” and the GARBC website similarly states, “The local church should practice two ordinances: (1) baptism of believers by immersion in water, identifying the individual with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, and (2) the Lord’s Supper, or communion, commemorating His death for our sins.”³

Yet this paper will demonstrate that limiting church ordinances to two has not always been the case for Baptists. Instead, I will show that Baptists only recently began using this language, adopting the term *ordinance* to replace the term *sacrament* in describing baptism and the Lord’s Supper. I will first demonstrate that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Baptists listed more than only two ordinances for the church, followed by an exploration of their use of the term “sacrament” to distinguish baptism and the Supper from the other ordinances. I will then identify when and why language among Baptists changed to limit the ordinances to two and argue that this change weakened biblical authority among modern Baptists.

Ordinances vs. Sacraments in Baptist Usage

Ordinances

Early English Baptists employed the term “ordinance” more broadly than modern Baptists often do. For example, in his 1609 “Short Confession of Faith,” John Smyth (1554–1612) states the “holy ordinances contained in the Word of God” for the church to be “ministers

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² This is often reflected in the first “T” in the convenient acrostic “B-A-P-T-I-S-T”: **B**iblical Authority; **A**utonomy of the Local Church; **P**riesthood of the Believer; **T**wo Ordinances; **I**ndividual Soul Liberty; **S**aved, Baptized Church Membership; **T**wo Offices; **S**eparation of Church and State. See, for example, *Baptist Distinctives: Are They Important to You?* (Schaumburg, IL: The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, n.d.).

³ Interestingly, both the *BF&M* and the GARBC *Articles of Faith* appear to be based on the 1833 *New Hampshire Confession of Faith*, which simply says, “observing the ordinances of Christ” without specifying only two. The 1925 *BF&M* retained that language, while the 1963 and 2000 revisions added “two,” though the GARBC *Articles of Faith* did not. Similarly, Howard Foshee’s 1973 *Broadman Church Manual* states, “Baptists adhere to the concept that Christ left two ordinances for Christians to follow. These ordinances are baptism and the Lord’s Supper” (Howard B. Foshee, *Broadman Church Manual* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1973], 33). Likewise, R. Stanton Norman claims, “Baptists have historically practiced two religious observances: baptism and the Lord’s Supper” (R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005], 129); and Gregg Allison insists, “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the two ordinances given by Christ to his church” (Gregg R. Allison, “Toward a Theology of Human Embodiment,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13, no. 2 [2009]: 10).

of the gospel, the doctrines of the holy Word, the use of the holy sacraments, the oversight of the poor, and the ministers of the same offices; furthermore, the exercise of brotherly admonition and correction, and, finally, the separating of the impenitent.”⁴ In 1674, Hanserd Knollys (1514–1596) described prayer, Scripture reading, preaching, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and singing as ordinances;⁵ Thomas Patient (d. 1666) listed prayer, hearing, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, thanksgiving, almsgiving, and maintenance;⁶ Thomas Collier (c. 1615–c. 169) listed baptism, prayer, praise, preaching, the Lord’s Supper, assembling, admonition, discipline, community of goods, and holiness;⁷ and Praisegod Barbone (c. 1598–1679) used the term *ordinance* for everything ordained by Christ for the church.⁸ The articles of faith in Benjamin Keach’s (1640–1704) church state that Christ’s holy ordinances include “prayer, [reading] the Word of God, and preaching, with baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, etc.,”⁹ and elsewhere he lists other ordinances such as church discipline and days of prayer and fasting.¹⁰ Keach also argued that “laying on of hands (with prayer) upon baptized believers . . . is an ordinances of Christ, and ought to be submitted unto by all such persons that are admitted to partake of the Lord’s Supper.”¹¹ He called singing a “sacred ordinance,”¹² explicitly arguing that singing is just as much “an holy ordinance of Jesus Christ” as baptism is.¹³ He taught that “the work of a pastor is to preach the Word of Christ, or to feed the Flock, and to administer all the ordinances of the gospel which belong to his sacred office.”¹⁴

This extended view of the term *ordinance* was reflected in early Baptist confessions as well. The *First London Confession of Faith* published in 1644 explicitly identifies preaching as an ordinance along with baptism in Article 38, though it does not call the Lord’s Supper an ordinance. The 1651 *Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations* describes “all the laws or ordinances of Jesus Christ” for “the congregation or fellowship of Christ” as the Lord’s Supper and prayer (including “sounding forth his praises with understanding” (51–53). 1678 *Orthodox Creed* describes as “ordinances of God” baptism, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, and fasting. The

⁴ John Smyth, “Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles (1609),” in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. William L. Lumpkin, 2nd ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 100–113.

⁵ Hanserd Knollys, *Christ Exalted: In a Sermon* (London, 1645), 2; Hanserd Knollys, *The World That Now Is; and the World That Is to Come: Or the First and Second Coming of Jesus Christ* (London: Thomas Snowden, 1681), 70–76.

⁶ Thomas Patient, *The Doctrine of Baptism* (London: Hills, 1654), 171.

⁷ Thomas Collier, *The Right Constitution and True Subjects of the Visible Church of Christ* (London: Henry Hills, 1654), 9–18, 70–86.

⁸ Praisegod Barbone, *A Reply to the Frivolous and Impertinent Answer of R. B. to the Discourse of P. B.* (London, 1643), 59.

⁹ Benjamin Keach, *The Articles of the Faith of the Church of Christ, Or Congregation Meeting at Horsley-Down* (London: Wing, 1697), 19.

¹⁰ Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church, and Its Discipline Display’d Wherein a True Gospel-Church Is Described: Together with the Power of the Keys, and Who Are to Be Let in, and Who to Be Shut Out* (London: Wing, 1697), 60.

¹¹ Keach, *Articles of Faith*, 23–24. See also Benjamin Keach, *Laying on of Hands upon Baptized Believers, as Such, Proved an Ordinance of Christ. In Answer to Mr. Danvers’s Former Book Intitled, A Treatise of Laying on of Hands* (London: Benjamin Harris, 1698).

¹² Benjamin Keach, *The Breach Repaired in God’s Worship: Or Singing Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs Proved to Be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ* (London: Hancock, 1691), 86.

¹³ “You, it seems, take the same way to destroy the ordinance of singing God’s praises, as they take to destroy the ordinance of baptism: but this will do your business no better than that will do theirs; dipping is washing, but every washing is not dipping” (Keach, *The Breach Repaired*, 18).

¹⁴ Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 8–9.

1689 *Second London Baptist Confession* identifies baptism and the Lord's Supper as "ordinances of positive and sovereign institution, appointed by the Lord Jesus, the only lawgiver, to be continued in his church to the end of the world" (28.1); while it does not explicitly identify any additional ordinances beyond the two, it never directly states these two are the only ordinances and later ambiguously refers to the "professed subjection to the ordinances of the gospel" (26.6), stating that a church "consists of officers and members . . . for the peculiar administration of ordinances" (26.8). In fact, though it does not use the term "ordinance," Article 22 lists other "parts of religious worship of God, to be performed in obedience to him" in addition to baptism and the Lord's Supper, including "the reading of Scriptures, preaching, and hearing the Word of God, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord" (22.5).¹⁵

Some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Baptists continued along the same line, some referring ambiguously to ordinances without limiting to two, and others explicitly listing ordinances beyond only baptism and the Lord's Supper. For example, in 1743 Benjamin Griffith (1688–1768) states that a pastor is "to administer all the ordinances of Christ, amongst them: as baptism, and the Lord's Supper, and herein he must be careful to follow the primitive pattern, thereby to hold forth the great end, wherefore they were ordained."¹⁶ Similarly, the Charleston Baptist Association's 1774 *A Summary of Church Discipline* notes that church members must "walk together, in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord"¹⁷ and insists that pastors "are to administer the ordinances of the gospel in a strict conformity to the Word of God."¹⁸ It does explicitly identify the Lord's Supper as an ordinance,¹⁹ but it does not mention baptism nor limit ordinances to two.²⁰ In fact, it claims that "excommunication is on all hands acknowledged to be an ordinance of Christ, the great Head of the church,"²¹ and in the context of discussing this ordinance also refers to "all other ordinances in general."²²

In 1810, John Gill (1697–1771) explicitly lists "public ordinances of divine worship" beyond baptism and the Supper, including the public ministry of the Word, public prayer, singing psalms, and place and time of public worship.²³ Joseph S. Baker (1798–1877) in 1847 called church discipline an ordinance of the church, insisting, "We are sticklers for the rules

¹⁵ The likely reason the *Confession* uses the term *ordinance* only for baptism and the Lord's Table is that its use of the term replaced *sacrament* from the *Westminster Confession*. More below.

¹⁶ Benjamin Griffith, "A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church (1743)," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 98.

¹⁷ The Baptist Association in Charleston, South Carolina, "A Summary of Church Discipline (1774)," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 118.

¹⁸ "Summary of Church Discipline," 121.

¹⁹ "The constitution of churches is plainly supposed, *Acts 2:47, Matt. 18:17, etc.*, and it is necessary, in order that the disciples of Christ may enjoy the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, which is a church ordinance, that they watch over one another, warn the unruly, and lay censures on disorderly and impenitent persons" ("Summary of Church Discipline," 118, 121).

²⁰ Admittedly, it does mention "administering the Word and ordinances" ("Summary of Church Discipline," 119).

²¹ "Summary of Church Discipline," 128.

²² "Summary of Church Discipline," 131.

²³ John Gill, *Complete Body of Practical and Doctrinal Divinity: Being a System of Evangelical Truths, Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Printed for Delaplaine and Hellings, by B. Graves, 1810), 541–94.

which God has prescribed for the administration of gospel ordinances.”²⁴ W. B. Johnson (1782–1862) in 1864 lists among the ordinances: church discipline, restoration, the Lord’s Supper, exercise of spiritual gifts, giving to those in need, the reading of Scripture, singing, and prayer, all to be observed on the first day of the week.²⁵ Even the 1833 New Hampshire Baptist Confession describes a “visible church of Christ” as broadly “observing the ordinances of Christ,” without mentioning what those ordinances are. Interestingly, the original 1920 *Baptist Faith and Message* and the GARBC *Articles of Faith*, both originally based on the New Hampshire Confession, retain the ambiguous language; only later in 1963 does the *BF&M* explicitly limit the ordinances to two, and the present form of the GARBC *Articles* does not.

Sacraments

Clearly, Baptists well into the nineteenth century used the term *ordinance* more broadly than simply to refer to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Those who listed other ordinances, however, did nevertheless often set baptism and the Supper apart from the other ordinances. For example, Benjamin Keach distinguished ordinances that particularly belonged to the church: “Moreover, . . . all persons have free liberty to assemble with the church, and to partake of all ordinances, save those which peculiarly belong to the church; as the Lord’s Supper, holy discipline, and days of prayer and fasting.”²⁶ These ordinances, therefore, were limited to church members only, while other “public” ordinances, according to Keach, were open to non-member participation, such as prayer, Scripture reading, preaching, and singing.²⁷ Keach’s catechism states explicitly: “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper differ from the other ordinances of God in that they were specially instituted by Christ to represent and apply to believers the benefits of the new covenant by visible and outward signs” (Q. 99).²⁸

In order to set these two ordinances apart from the others, early Baptist authors often—though not universally—employed the traditional term *sacrament*. John Smyth’s 1610 Confession states, “There are two sacraments appointed by Christ, in his holy church, the administration whereof he hath assigned to the ministry of teaching, namely, the Holy Baptism and the Holy Supper.”²⁹ Additionally, the 1678 *Orthodox Creed* refers to baptism and the Supper as “those two sacraments,” which are “ordinances of positive, sovereign, and holy institution,

²⁴ Joseph S. Baker, “Queries Considered or an Investigation of Various Subjects Involved in the Exercise of Church Discipline (1847),” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 264, 277.

²⁵ W. B. Johnson, “The Gospel Developed Through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ (1846),” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001).

²⁶ Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 60.

²⁷ “Yet others may attend on all other public ordinances with the church; as public prayer, reading, and preaching the word and in singing God’s praises, as hath formerly been proved” (Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 60).

²⁸ *Instructions for Children: Or, The Child’s and Youth’s Delight Teaching an Easy Way to Spell and Read True English Containing the Father’s Godly Advice and Directing Parents in a Right and Spiritual Manner to Educate Their Children with a Scripture Catechism, Wherein All the Chief Principles of True Christianity Are Clearly Open’d. Together with Many Other Things, Both Pleasant and Useful for the Education of Children* (Horsely-down New Stairs, Southwark: John Robinson, 1763).

²⁹ Smyth, “Short Confession.”

appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ, the only lawgiver, to be continued in his church, to the end of the world.”³⁰

Keach likewise used the term. He defined a “church of Christ” as a congregation “among whom the Word of God and sacraments are duly administered, according to Christ’s institution,”³¹ and he distinguished performing “all duties of instituted worship” from administering the “sacraments.”³² He specifically designated the Lord’s Supper as “a holy sacrament,”³³ and his catechism asks, “What are those gospel ordinances or sacraments, which tend to confirm us in this faith?” The answer is: “the Lord’s Supper and baptism.”³⁴ Thus, as John Gray asserts, “Keach believed that God commands the church to uphold nine ordinances, of which two are sacraments or signs.”³⁵ Kiffin also distinguished between “Word and sacraments,”³⁶ and both Thomas Lambe (d. 1672) and Hercules Collins (1646–1702) also used the term.³⁷

Thus, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Baptists argued that there are more than two ordinances given to the church, and they set baptism and the Lord’s Supper as special, but although some designated the latter as *sacraments*, this practice was certainly not universal. In fact, no major Baptist confession other than the *Orthodox Creed* used the term *sacrament*; notably, the 1689 *Baptist Confession* explicitly replaced the term *sacrament* in the *Westminster Confession* with *ordinance* throughout. This alone likely influenced the change in later Baptist use of the terms.

Shift in Later Baptists

Language referring to only two ordinances begins to appear more regularly among Baptists in the mid-nineteenth century. A few authors in the early nineteenth century seem to imply only two ordinances, such as George Gibbs in 1821 and Edward Underhill (1813–1901) in

³⁰ “The Orthodox Creed, or a Protestant Confession of Faith, Being an Essay to Unite and Confirm All True Protestants in the Fundamental Articles of the Christian Religion, Against the Errors and Heresies of Rome (1679),” in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 325.

³¹ Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 5–6. See also *Preaching from Types and Metaphors of the Bible* (1681) (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972), 715: “That the true church of God is a number of sincere and godly Christians who have solemnly covenanted, and given up themselves, to walk in the true order and fellowship of the gospel, according to the exact rule of God’s Word, amongst whom the Word of God is truly preached, and the sacraments are duly and in a right manner administered.”

³² “The New Testament is the only rule or perfect copy, by which we ought to act and perform all duties of instituted worship, and administer sacraments, &c. which are mere positive precepts, and depend only upon the will and pleasure of the law-maker” (Benjamin Keach, *Gold Refin’d Or, Baptism in Its Primitive Purity* [London, 1689], 141).

³³ Keach, *Preaching from Types and Metaphors*, 632.

³⁴ *Instructions for Children*, 85.

³⁵ John Kimmons Gray, “The Preacher of Spiritual Worship: Benjamin Keach’s (1640–1704) Desire for Primitive Purity in Worship” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 251–52.

³⁶ William Kiffin, *A Brief Remonstrance of the Reasons and Grounds of Those People Commonly Called Anabaptists, for Their Separation* (London, 1645), 3.

³⁷ Thomas Lambe, *A Confutation of Infants Baptisme* (London, 1643), 37; Hercules Collins, *Some Reasons for Separation from the Communion of the Church of England* (London: How, 1682), 393.

1845.³⁸ In 1849 J. L. Reynolds (1812–1877) clearly argued, “The New Testament contains traces of only two Christian ordinances. These are baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”³⁹ In 1860, P. H. Mell (1814–1888) asserted that “a minister has two functions” consisting of “preach[ing] the gospel” and “administer[ing] the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper,” seemingly restricting ordinances to those two as distinguished from preaching.⁴⁰ In 1863 Eleazer Savage (1800–1886) also appears to distinguish “observance of the ordinances” from preaching and prayer.⁴¹ In 1882, Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) unequivocally asserts, “We know of two ordinances instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ—the baptism of believers and the Lord’s Supper; and we utterly abhor and reject all pretended sacraments of every kind.”⁴²

John Briggs suggests two reasons for a shift in language among Baptists in the nineteenth century. First, what he describes as a “low view of the sacraments” grew in conjunction with the arguments of Robert Hall (1764–1831) and others in the early nineteenth century in favor of a more open communion. Briggs suggests, “In refusing communion to others, the closed communionists, Robert Hall argued, were like the Roman Catholics setting themselves up as the only true church.”⁴³ Catholicism was enjoying somewhat of a revival in England at the time, and so this ad hominem association of closed communion with Catholicism, according to Briggs, “made Baptists far too negative and reactive in their thinking about the sacraments, now more frequently referred to as ordinances, although all too often conceived in such minimalist terms as even Zwingli would not own.”⁴⁴

Argument against Romanist sacramentalism does appear to factor, for example, in Reynolds’s claim in 1849 that the New Testament contains only two ordinances. In the context of this claim, Reynolds strongly insists that “the external means of grace possess no intrinsic efficacy, but derive their tendency to confirm and strengthen the saints solely from the appointment of God. None of them are invested with the agency of an *opus operatum*, a power to convey grace by their inherent efficiency.”⁴⁵ Reynolds also rejects the term *sacrament* because it

³⁸ “The duties which Christianity enjoins upon its disciples are classed under two heads; moral and positive. The former arise from the moral relation or fitness of things, and approve them selves to the consciences of all intellectual beings; the latter are founded upon an express command, and derive their obligation from the authority by which they are enforced: such are the two ordinances of the Christian church—baptism and the Lord’s supper” (George Gibbs, *A Defence of the Baptists: Or, the Baptism of Believers by Immersion the Only Baptism of the Christian Dispensation*, 2nd ed. [London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1829], 4); “Baptism and the Lord’s supper are the two visible ordinances of the covenant of grace” (Gibbs, *A Defence of the Baptists*, 29); “Looking , then , at the two ordinances of the gospel . . .” (Edward Bean Underhill, *The Baptist Record, and Biblical Repository*, vol. 2 [Oxford: G. & J. Dyer, 1845], 8).

³⁹ J. L. Reynolds, “Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ, in Its Internal and External Development (1849),” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 363.

⁴⁰ P. H. Mell, “Corrective Church Discipline: With a Development of the Scriptural Principles Upon Which It Is Based (1860),” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 458.

⁴¹ Eleazer Savage, “Church Discipline, in Two Parts, Formative & Corrective; in Which Is Developed the True Philosophy of Religious Education (1863),” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 511.

⁴² C. H. Spurgeon, “The Right Observance of the Lord’s Supper (1882),” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 45 (Lond: Passmore & Alabaster, 1899), 421.

⁴³ J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 64.

⁴⁴ Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, 65.

⁴⁵ Reynolds, “Church Polity,” 363.

is “not to be found in the Word of God.”⁴⁶ Similarly, in 1887 James Petigru Boyce (1827–1888) claimed that “the continued use of the word sacrament . . . led many to attach a superstitious sacredness to [the] ordinances” of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, insisting that use of the term “has no scriptural authority.”⁴⁷ Concern about Romanist superstition may have subsequently solidified replacing the term *sacrament* for baptism and the Lord’s Supper with the term *ordinance*, as well as the consequent result of insisting on only two ordinances. For example, in 1874 Spurgeon commented, “I have often grieved over the fact that these two ordinances, baptism and the Lord’s supper, have become nests in which the foul bird of superstition has laid her eggs.”⁴⁸

By the twentieth century the practice among Baptists of replacing *sacrament* with *ordinances* and thus limiting ordinances to two had become firmly established.⁴⁹

Defining the Terms

What appears evident is that a key reason Baptists have limited ordinances to two is that they replaced the term *sacrament* with *ordinance* due to concern with what the former term implies about baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Therefore, a brief survey of the meaning and use of both terms may provide some clarity.

Ordinance

Historically, the term *ordinance* signified those clear prescriptions given by Christ and his apostles for the church. Often early Baptists’ descriptions of the ordinances include modifying phrases that indicate as such. Many examples were already cited above, but a few more will solidify the point. For example, Keach admonishes churches to “keep all the ordinances of Christ as they were once delivered to the saints, owning the Holy Scriptures to be the only rule of their faith and practice.”⁵⁰ Ordinances were commands of “divine institution”

⁴⁶ Reynolds, “Church Polity,” 389.

⁴⁷ James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (1887) (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 423.

⁴⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, “The Double Forget-Me-Not (1874),” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 54 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1908), 315.

⁴⁹ As noted above, the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* retained from the New Hampshire Confession ambiguity regarding the number of ordinances, and the GARB *Articles of Faith* still does; but the 1963 *BF&M* states that churches observe “the two ordinances of Christ,” which the 2000 revision retains. Some Baptist authors do acknowledge the shift in language from *sacrament* to *ordinance*. For example, R Stanton Norman, while claiming, “Baptists have historically practiced two religious observances: baptism and the Lord’s Supper,” admits, “evidence does exist that a few Baptists on occasion have used the term *sacrament*, but the vast majority of Baptists commonly use the word *ordinance* to refer to baptism or the Lord’s Supper. The words *sacrament* and *ordinance* are sometimes used interchangeably” (Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 129). Others make historically indefensible claims, such as Paul Enns who states, “Protestants have historically recognized two ordinances, baptism and the Lord’s Supper,” (Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1989], 359); and Rolland McCune asserts, “Some, mainly non-Baptists, have adopted the word *sacrament* for ordinance” (Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity, Volume 3: The Doctrines of Salvation, the Church, and Last Things* [Allen Park, Mich.: Detroit Baptist Theological Se, 2010], 269).

⁵⁰ Benjamin Keach, *The Display of Glorious Grace: Or the Covenant of Peace, Opened. In Fourteen Sermons* (London: Bridge, 1698), 252–53.

that must be observed, according to Keach.⁵¹ Knollys insisted that “the whole worship of God and all the sacred ordinances of the Lord be administered according to the gospel institutions, commandments, and examples of Christ and his holy apostles,” and he condemned “inventions and traditions of men being mixed with the holy ordinances of God.”⁵² William Kiffin claimed, “I have no other design, but the preserving the ordinances of Christ, in their purity and order as they are left unto us in the holy scriptures of truth, and to warn the churches to keep close to the rule, least they be found not to worship the Lord according to his prescribed order he make a break among them.”⁵³ Likewise, Reynolds argued, “To a devout mind, it cannot be a matter of trivial interest, that the ordinances of the gospel not only derive their validity from the appointment of the great Head of the Church, but are hallowed and commended to our imitation by his own example. . . .” On this basis, he argued, “Baptism is a positive institution.”⁵⁴

Indeed, Baptist use of the term *ordinance* to describe all of the biblically prescribed elements of public worship fit within their broader concern for what Matthew Ward calls “pure worship” based upon clear biblical prescription.⁵⁵ Early English Baptists clearly articulated in their confessions of faith, “The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself” (LBC 22:1). John Spilsbury (1593–1668) declared, “The holy Scripture is the only place where any ordinance of God in the case aforesaid is to be found, they being the fountain-head, containing all the instituted rules of both of church and ordinances.”⁵⁶ John Gill later proclaimed, “Now for an act of religious worship there must be a command of God. God is a jealous God, and will not suffer anything to be admitted into the worship of him, but what is according to his Word and will.”⁵⁷ They insisted that the practices of the church be limited to what Scripture—specifically, the New Testament—commanded, and as Kiffin noted, “that where a rule and express law is prescribed to men, that very prescription, is an express prohibition of the contrary.”⁵⁸ This concern among Baptists continued well into the early nineteenth century, as seen by John Fawcett’s (1739–1817) very direct assertion in 1808:

No acts of worship can properly be called holy, but such as the Almighty has enjoined. No man, nor any body of men have any authority to invent rites and ceremonies of worship; to change the ordinances which he has established; or to invent new ones. . . . The divine Word is the only safe directory in what relates to his own immediate service. The question is not what we may think becoming, decent, or proper, but what our gracious Master has authorized as such. In matters of religion, nothing bears the stamp of holiness but what God has ordained.⁵⁹

⁵¹ Keach, *Articles of Faith*, 27.

⁵² Hanserd Knollys, *An Exposition of the Whole Book of Revelation* (London, 1688), 123–24, 101–103.

⁵³ William Kiffin, *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church Communion* (Baptist Standard Bearer, Incorporated, 2006), 1.

⁵⁴ Reynolds, “Church Polity,” 364.

⁵⁵ Matthew W. Ward, “Pure Worship: The Early English Baptist Distinctive” (PhD diss., United States -- Texas, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013).

⁵⁶ John Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme* (London: n.p., 1643), 89.

⁵⁷ Gill, *Complete Body of Practical and Doctrinal Divinity*, 899.

⁵⁸ Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, 28–29.

⁵⁹ John Fawcett, *The Holiness Which Becometh the House of the Lord* (Halifax: Holden and Dawson, 1808), 25.

Thus, the term *ordinance* meant those practices for the church's worship that were clearly prescribed in the New Testament; these ordinances must be practiced, and no other. Knollys defined the "pure worship of God" as that which strictly observed the "holy ordinances of the gospel."⁶⁰ Likewise, Henry Jessy (1603–1663) insisted, "Forms or ordinances are ways and means of divine worship, or Christ's appointment,"⁶¹ and these early Baptists defined "will-worship" as "every administration and application of an ordinance of Christ, otherwise than according to the rule of the Word."⁶² Edward T. Hiscox (1814–1901) helpfully defined *ordinance* as "institutions of divine authority relating to the worship of God, under the Christian Dispensation."⁶³

W. B. Johnson explicitly derived the term *ordinance* from 1 Corinthians 11:2, which in the King James Version reads, "Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you."⁶⁴ He stated, "I use the term *ordinances* . . . as meaning exercises of divine worship, enjoined upon the disciples in their stated meetings."⁶⁵ Joseph Baker likewise alluded to 1 Corinthians 11:2 when he admonished, "Let us labor to keep the law of God, as well as the ordinances of the gospel, 'as they were delivered to the saints.'"⁶⁶ Indeed, regardless how much early Baptists debated exactly what the ordinances were or how they should be practiced, biblically-pure worship was *the* early English Baptist distinctive.⁶⁷ Furthermore, fidelity to New Testament prescription continued well into the nineteenth century. As late as 1881, William Wilkinson (1833–1920) argued, "It is not for obedience in baptism according to any definition, even according to the true definition, that Baptists stand. What Baptists stand for is obedience to Christ in everything—in baptism, certainly; but in all other points not less. Their organizing principle is the principle of universal obedience."⁶⁸

Twentieth-century Baptists agree with earlier definitions of *ordinance* as a New Testament command for church practice, such as Sam Bradford, who states, "An ordinance is understood to be a symbolic ceremony exemplified by Christ, commanded by him for perpetual observance, and practiced by the NT church with their evident understanding that such observance should be continued in the practices of the NT church." Nevertheless, he continues by asserting that such commands are only two.⁶⁹ Bradford is not unique. For example, Arthur Farstad insists that "to be a valid ordinance of the Christian church," a practice had to be "instituted by Christ himself," "practiced in the Acts of the Apostles," and "Explained in the Epistles of the NT." He then claims, "Only two ordinances meet these three criteria: baptism and the Lord's Supper."⁷⁰ Likewise, Charles Ryrie argues, "Using the basic idea in ordinance of

⁶⁰ Knollys, *An Exposition of the Whole Book of Revelation*, 189.

⁶¹ Henry Jessy, *A Storehouse of Provision to Further Resolution in Several Cases of Conscience* (London: Charles Sumptner, 1650), 9.

⁶² Benjamin Cox, Hanserd Knollys, and William Kiffin, *A Declaration Concerning The Publike Dispute Which Should Have Been in the Publike Meetinghouse of Alderman-Bury* (London: n.p., 1645), 18.

⁶³ Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1894), 119.

⁶⁴ Modern versions translate *paradoseis* as "tradition."

⁶⁵ Johnson, "The Gospel Developed," 204.

⁶⁶ Baker, "Queries Considered," 282.

⁶⁷ This is the subtitle of Matthew Ward's book and the core of his argument (Ward, "Pure Worship"). See also Scott Aniol, "Form and Substance: Baptist Ecclesiology and the Regulative Principle," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2018).

⁶⁸ William Cleaver Wilkinson, *The Baptist Principle in Its Application to Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1881), 8.

⁶⁹ Sam Bradford, "The New Testament Church," *Central C. B. Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1958): 25.

⁷⁰ Arthur L. Farstad, "We Believe In: The Lord's Supper," *JETS* 4, no. 1 (1991): 7.

‘prescribed rite or practice,’ a working definition of an ecclesiastical ordinance might be ‘an outward rite prescribed by Christ to be performed by his church.’ Such a definition,” Ryrie argues, “would reduce the possible number of ordinances to two—baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”⁷¹ McCune similarly explains, “In the end, Scripture indicates that an ordinance must have the following four ingredients: sovereign authorization by the Lord Jesus Christ, symbolism of saving truth, specific command for perpetuation, [and] biblical evidence of historical fulfillment or practice. . . . Accordingly, Baptists assert,” says McCune,” that only two ordinances fit the biblical criteria—water baptism and communion.”⁷²

Yet one wonders, if a proper definition of *ordinance* is a practice prescribed in the New Testament for observance by churches to the end of the age, as both early Baptists and recent Baptists seem to agree, then are there really only two practices that qualify? Certainly early Baptists seemed to go overboard in their debate over what elements may be considered biblical ordinances, but some are clearly prescribed and enjoy near universal agreement among Baptists: reading the Word (1 Tim 4:13, Col 4:16, 1 Thess 5:27), preaching the Word (1 Tim 4:13, 2 Tim 4:2), singing the Word (Col 3:16, Eph 5:19), prayer (1 Tim 2:1, Col 4:2, Eph 6:18), baptism (Matt 28:19), and the Lord’s Table (1 Cor 11:23–32).

Hiscox’s 1894 definition of *ordinance* and subsequent restriction to two illustrates the problem.⁷³ As mentioned earlier. Hiscox defines *ordinance* as “institutions of divine authority relating to the worship of God, under the Christian Dispensation.” This leads him to acknowledge, then, that “in this general sense there are various ordinances; since preaching and hearing the Word, prayer, singing, fasting, and thanksgiving may all be considered as institutions of divine authority.” However, he then reflects the change in terminology common to his day by stating, “but in a narrower and a more distinctive sense it has been common to call baptism and the Lord’s Supper by this name.” This leads him to insist, then, that baptism and the Supper are “are the only Christian ordinances committed to the churches, and are for perpetual observance,” and again later, “These two, therefore, baptism and the Supper, are the two sacred rites, and the only ones, enjoined by Christ for perpetual observance in his churches. . . . Christ has appointed no others,” Hiscox claims. “They are positive institutions, . . . their claim to respect and observance rests . . . on the simple fact that Christ has established them and commanded their obedience.” But based on Hiscox’s own definition of an ordinance, are preaching and hearing the Word, prayer, singing, fasting, and thanksgiving not committed to the church for perpetual observance?

If an *ordinance* is a church practice prescribed in the New Testament, then at minimum six qualify, not two. One may object to this argument on two grounds: first, some modern Baptist definitions of the ordinances insist that an ordinance must be prescribed by Christ himself, in effect ascribing more weight to the red letters in the NT than to the black. This objection fails since Jesus Christ himself delegated authority for the church to his apostles; Christ is the church’s cornerstone, but the apostles are her foundation (Eph 2:18–22). Thus, in instituting the Lord’s Table, for example, Paul could say, “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you” (1 Cor 11:23). To obey the apostles is to obey Christ, and to ignore them is to ignore their Master.⁷⁴ The second objection to listing at least six ordinances of the church is that it ignores

⁷¹ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 149.

⁷² McCune, *A Systematic Theology: Volume 3*, 269–70.

⁷³ Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, 119–20.

⁷⁴ Ryan J. Martin makes this argument in “Love for Christ and Scripture-Regulated Worship,” *Artistic Theologian* 8 (2020): 23–46.

the special significance of baptism and the Lord's Supper. To this objection I would simply reply that clearly early Baptists were able to set apart baptism and the Supper while at the same time listing more biblically-prescribe ordinances. They did so both through clear instruction and in some cases, as noted above, by retaining the word *sacrament*. This leads to a discussion of that term.

Sacrament

Though the term *sacrament* came into use earlier,⁷⁵ Augustine (354–430) may have been the first to give the term clear definition: “The reason these things are called sacraments is that in them one thing is seen, another is to be understood. What can be seen has a bodily appearance, what is to be understood provides spiritual fruit.”⁷⁶ Often Augustine's definition of *sacrament* is simplified to “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”⁷⁷ The medieval Catholic understanding of both the nature and number of sacraments devolved over time, yet the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers retained the term, restricting its use to describe only baptism and the Lord's Supper, and insisting that the sacraments have no efficacy in themselves apart from the Word and Spirit. John Calvin (1509–1564) defined a sacrament as “an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men.”⁷⁸ But he strongly stresses, “it is not as if I thought that there is a kind of secret efficacy perpetually inherent in them, by which they can of themselves promote or strengthen faith.”⁷⁹ Rather, Calvin insisted, “let it be a fixed point, that the office of the sacraments differs not from the Word of God; and this is to hold forth and offer Christ to us, and, in him, the treasures of heavenly grace. They confer nothing, and avail nothing, if not received in faith.”⁸⁰

Early Baptists used the term *sacrament* within this Protestant context, considering baptism and the Lord's Supper to be visible signs of spiritual grace. For example, Smyth noted, “These are outward visible handlings and tokens, setting before our eyes, on God's side, the inward spiritual handling which God, through Christ, by the cooperation of the Holy Ghost, sets forth the justification in the penitent faithful soul; and which, on our behalf, witnesses our religion, experience, faith, and obedience, through the obtaining of a good conscience to the

⁷⁵ The Latin term, *sacramentum*, appears to come into use as early as Tertullian, as a translation of the NT Greek, μυστήριον (“mystery”). See Tertullian, *The Five Books Against Marcion*, in Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, 3:319–474; Theodore B. Foster, “‘Mysterium’ and ‘Sacramentum’ in the Vulgate and Old Latin Versions,” *The American Journal of Theology* 19, no. 3 (July 1915).

⁷⁶ Augustine, “Sermons,” in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 272.

⁷⁷ R. S. Wallace, “Sacrament,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 965. See Augustine, *Questions on the Heptateuch*, III, 84 (c. 410), in James F. White, *Documents of Christian Worship: Descriptive and Interpretive Sources* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 120.

⁷⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 4.14.1.

⁷⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.9.

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.17.

service of God.”⁸¹ Keach defined a sacrament as a “sign or representation.”⁸² He argued that a sacrament has two parts, “an outward element or sign, and the inward grace signified by it.”⁸³ Kiffin also described the sacraments in language similar to Calvin: “As the Supper is a spiritual participation of the body and blood of Christ by faith, and so (not merely by the work done) is a means of salvation, so baptism signs and seals our salvation to us, which lies in justification and discharge of sin.”⁸⁴

Means of Grace

Early Baptists agreed with their Reformed counterparts not only that baptism and the Lord’s supper are visible signs of spiritual graces, but also that all the divinely instituted ordinances are means of grace to those who practice them in faith. For example, Keach stated, “We believe that the outward and more ordinary means, whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption, are his holy ordinances, as prayer, the Word of God, and preaching, with baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, &c. and yet notwithstanding it is the Spirit of God that maketh prayer, reading, &c. and specially the preaching of the Word, effectual to the convincing, converting, building up, and comforting, through faith, all the elect of God unto salvation.”⁸⁵ Knollys asserted, “The end why the church is so planted, builded, and formed, is that they may meet together in one to worship God publicly in spirit and truth in all his sacred gospel ordinances, to the glory of God, and for the mutual edification of that mystical body of Christ, whose head he is.”⁸⁶ Benjamin Cox (1595–c. 1663) said of baptism, “and where this obedience is in faith performed, there Christ makes this his ordinance a means of unspeakable benefit to the believing soul.”⁸⁷ The 1689 *Confession* states that “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 baptism and the Lord’s supper, prayer, and other means appointed of God, it is increased and strengthened” (14.1). It says specifically of the Supper, “Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this ordinance, 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” (30.7). Later, Spurgeon stated that the Lord’s Supper “is more than a memorial, it is a fellowship, a communion. Those who eat of this bread, spiritually understanding what they do, those who drink of this cup, entering into the real meaning of that reception of the wine, do therein receive Christ spiritually into their hearts.”⁸⁸ Spurgeon’s catechism explicitly states, “The outward and ordinary means whereby the Holy Spirit communicates to us the benefits of Christ’s redemption, are the Word, by which souls are begotten to spiritual life; baptism, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, and meditation, by all which believers are further edified in

⁸¹ Smyth, “Short Confession.”

⁸² Keach, *Gold Refin’d*, 42.

⁸³ Keach, *Preaching from Types and Metaphors*, 636.

⁸⁴ Kiffin, *Sober Discourse*, 25–26.

⁸⁵ Keach, *Articles of Faith*, 20–21.

⁸⁶ Knollys, *An Exposition of the Whole Book of Revelation*, 18.

⁸⁷ Benjamin Cox, *An Appendix to a Confession of Faith* (London, 1646), 38.

⁸⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, “The Greatest Exhibition of the Age (1889),” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 39 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1893), 218.

their most holy faith.”⁸⁹ Boyce similarly states, “The ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are also means of sanctification.”⁹⁰

Furthermore, many modern Baptists who restrict ordinances to two define those ordinances similarly to the more historic definition of sacrament. For example, Hiscox defines the two ordinances as “visible signs which appeal to the senses, [and] teaching institutions which appeal to the understanding and the heart.”⁹¹ A. H. Strong similarly states, “By the ordinances, we mean those outward rites which Christ had appointed in his church as visible signs of the saving truth of the gospel.”⁹²

What We Lost

What this brief historical survey has demonstrated is that the terms Baptists have used to describe all of the clearly prescribed New Testament elements of public worship and the two distinct visible signs has changed over time. One might suggest that this was simply a necessarily simplification of language as Baptist doctrine became more settled. However, I would suggest that along with this change, especially in insisting that the NT contains only two ordinances, Baptists lost at least three important biblical emphases.

First, and most importantly, modern Baptists have weakened the importance of biblical authority over their worship, at least in part by losing the term *ordinance* to describe all NT commands for church practice. By restricting the term *ordinance*—a term that both means and is explicitly defined by Baptist authors as “a command”—to only baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Baptists at least imply that churches need not restrict their practice only to what the New Testament commands. Certainly churches may do more than baptize and celebrate the Supper. All other elements of public worship are left ambiguous and, by implication at least, require no biblical prescription. Thus, while all Baptist churches also include preaching, prayer, Scripture reading, and singing, most do not refer to them as NT ordinances, and they often include more than what the New Testament prescribes.

That modern Baptists lost the early Baptist allegiance to strict biblical simplicity in worship during roughly the same period as the shift in language from at least six ordinances to two is no coincidence. Many Baptist church services today could hardly be described as regulated by Scripture, including as they do many elements not prescribed in the NT. Along with other factors, such as revivalism, pragmatism, and church growth methodology, one contributor to this loss of concern about biblical authority in worship may be the language Baptists use to describe what they do when they gather. Recovering the term *ordinance* for *all* of the biblically-

⁸⁹ Question 71, *Spurgeon’s Catechism*, 1855.

⁹⁰ Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (1887), 421. Even Paige Patterson argues that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are more than “mere symbol” and contribute to sanctification (Paige Patterson, “Observing Two Ordinances—Are They Merely Symbols?,” in *Upon This Rock: A Baptist Understanding of the Church*, ed. Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III [Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010], 102–15). See also Michael A. G. Haykin, “‘His Soul-Refreshing Presence’: The Lord’s Supper in Calvinistic Baptist Thought and Experience in the ‘Long’ Eighteenth Century,” in *Baptist Sacramentalism*, ed. Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003), 177–93.

⁹¹ Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, 120.

⁹² Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 930.

prescribed elements of worship could help to stress their importance and prevent the introduction of elements not prescribed.

Second, over-reaction to the *ex opera operato* sacramentalism of Roman Catholicism by Baptists, part of the reason for changing the meaning of the term *ordinance*, has weakened Baptists' understanding of the spiritual benefit of all the biblically-prescribed ordinances. As noted above, Baptists throughout history have recognized that God has prescribed the means through which he sanctifies his people, namely, the six ordinances. The regular, disciplined use of these means of grace progressively forms believers into the image of Jesus Christ; these are the means through which Christians “work out [their] own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [them], both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12–13). They are means of grace for a believe specifically because they are what God has ordained in his Word; in fact, the prescribed elements *are* the Word—reading the Word, preaching the Word, praying the Word, singing the Word, and “seeing the Word” in baptism and the Supper. Calling them all ordinances will help to recover recognition that they are means of grace.

Third, change in terminology has also led to weakening the special spiritual significance of baptism and the Supper. This is ironic, considering that one reason many Baptists give for specifically designating only baptism and the Supper as ordinances is that it raises the significance of the two above everything else. However, the change in terminology has had the opposite effect. The Lord's Supper particularly has become rather insignificant in many Baptist churches, perhaps observed once a quarter or once a month, but certainly not as frequently as other elements these Baptists do not even consider ordinances. Recovering the traditional use of *ordinances* at minimum helps to demonstrate that all of what the NT prescribes for worship, including baptism and the Supper, are equally important for the spiritual well-being of the congregation.

Proposal

At minimum, I propose that we should stop claiming that holding to two ordinances is a Baptist distinctive. It may be now, but it has not been historically nor biblically. The New Testament prescribes at least six ordinances for the church: baptism, the Lord's Supper, preaching, Scripture reading, prayer, and singing—we ought to call them ordinances to emphasize their biblical mandate, just like our Baptist forefathers did.

We ought also to set apart baptism and the Lord's supper from the other ordinances in that (a) they are unique to the church (and not Israel), (b) they are restricted to believers, and (c) they are visible signs. However, nineteenth-century Baptist rationale for rejecting the term *sacrament* does have warrant, especially so as Evangelical reproachment with Romans Catholicism grows and errant sacramentalism threatens a biblical view of worship. Perhaps we can distinguish them simply through explanation and practice, or perhaps deliberately using a term like *visible sign* would communicate their significance.

Attention to clarity in the terms we use for the practice of public worship may help us to “stand firm and hold to the [ordinances] that [we] were taught by [Christ's apostles], either by [their] spoken word or by [their] letter[s]” (2 Thess 2:15).