Ordinances and Sacraments

What does the church do—and what does God do through it?

From the New Testament to the contemporary church

Two words, different emphases

Ordinance

A practice commanded by Christ for the church to observe. Often emphasizes obedience, witness, remembrance, and faith.

Sacrament

A visible sign or rite through which God communicates or seals grace, understood differently across traditions.

Start with Scripture

1 Peter 3:18 - 21

“Baptism now saves you” — immediately qualified: not removal of dirt, but an appeal to God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:16

The cup is described as a “sharing” in Christ’s blood; the bread as a “sharing” in Christ’s body.

The core theological questions

- Does the rite merely represent a reality—or participate in it?
- Is grace given through the rite, received by faith, or both?
- What makes an act a church-wide ordinance or sacrament?
- Who instituted it, and who may administer it?

The earliest Christian pattern

- Baptism marked entry into the Christian community.
- The gathered church shared the Lord’s Supper.
- Other practices existed, but no fixed seven-sacrament list.

Early voices

Didache (late 1st / early 2nd c.)

Instructions for baptism; thanksgiving prayers and the Lord’s Day gathering.

Justin Martyr (c. 150)

Describes baptism, prayer, the Eucharist, and a strong understanding of communion as more than ordinary food.

Augustine: visible signs and invisible realities

- Sacraments are sacred signs pointing beyond themselves.
- God’s action and the church’s outward act are distinguished.
- Augustine used “sacrament” more broadly than the later list of seven.

How did the number become seven?

- Early centuries: no universally fixed list or count.
- 12th century: Peter Lombard lists seven in the Sentences.
- 1274: Second Council of Lyon names seven.
- 1439 and 1547: Florence and Trent reaffirm seven.

Reformation: not one Protestant answer

Luther & Reformed

Luther retains Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as instituted means of grace (and sometimes discusses absolution). Reformed churches emphasize signs and seals received by faith.

Zwingli & later Baptists

Zwingli strongly emphasizes confession and remembrance. Many Baptists speak of two ordinances without sacramental efficacy inherent in the acts.

Trent: the Catholic response

- Seven sacraments were instituted by Christ.
- They are not only signs of faith; they communicate grace.
- Grace is not produced by human merit or an empty ritual.
- The participant’s disposition still matters.

Eastern Orthodoxy: the holy mysteries

- Baptism and the Eucharist hold central importance.
- Sacraments are commonly called “mysteries.”
- Seven is a familiar teaching list, though Orthodox usage can be broader.

Protestant diversity today

Means of grace

Lutheran, Anglican and Reformed churches generally view baptism and communion as divinely instituted means by which God works, with important differences.

Ordinances as witness

Baptist and many free-church traditions emphasize believers’ obedience, proclamation, remembrance, and identification with Christ.

Compare the main traditions

Tradition	Typical count	Characteristic emphasis
Roman Catholic	7	Effective signs of grace
Eastern Orthodox	Often 7*	Holy mysteries; participation in divine life
Lutheran	2 primarily	Word and promise; means of grace
Reformed	2	Signs and seals; grace received by faith
Baptist / free church	2 ordinances	Obedience, witness, remembrance

** Orthodox descriptions often extend beyond a fixed list.*

What changed—and what did not?

- The church practiced baptism and the Supper from its beginning.
- Definitions, numbers, and explanations developed over centuries.
- The lasting question: what does Scripture promise through these acts?