

Biblical Ordinances to Be Observed by the Modern Christian

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The Bible prescribes a number of ordinances, but not all of them are applicable in the Christian dispensation of the present day. Before we proceed to list them, a generic working definition of *ordinance* is in order: “a prescribed usage, practice, or ceremony.”¹ A theological application of the term includes the expanded notion of a “religious rite or observance that sets forth the central truths of the Gospel and is of universal and perpetual obligation.”²

A rather obvious distinction should be pointed out between our definition of *ordinance* and another more generic one: “A legal statute or enactment” or “a distinct law or regulation of conduct, promulgated by God or by man.”³

This essay deals only with the first type of ordinances —those rites and observances having current validity. Because they were not of *perpetual* obligation, three examples of Biblical ordinances no longer applicable today are sacrificial offerings, circumcision, and the Passover. Sacrificial offerings and the Passover were merely types superseded by Christ the great Antitype, whereas circumcision ceased to be required when the apostle Paul effectively annulled it as a requirement (see 1 Corinthians 7:19 and Galatians 5:6).

Of the Biblical ordinances that still have validity today, exactly five come to mind. These are listed in the order of their appearance in Scripture. Each is supported by Spirit of Prophecy references.⁴

1. The ordinance of **marriage**. God performed the very first marriage ceremony when He presented Eve to Adam as a “help meet for him” in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:20). The phrase *help meet* here signifies “a helper corresponding to him—one who was fitted to be his companion, and who could be one with him in love and sympathy” (Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 46.2). Eve was, after all, created from a rib taken from Adam’s own side. “Marriage was in God’s order; it was one of the first institutions which He established. He gave special directions concerning this ordinance, clothing it with sanctity and beauty” (ibid., p. 101.2). “The Creator joined the hands of the holy pair in wedlock” (White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 63.2).
2. The ordinance of **tithing**. The earliest mention of tithing occurs in Genesis 14:18–20, where Abram presented Melchizedek as a priest of the Most High God with tithes of all the booty he had taken in the defeat of the Amorites. Abraham’s grandson Jacob also devoted a tithe to God (Genesis 28:22), and God at Mount Sinai incorporated the practice into the Mosaic code in order to assure the support of the Levitical ministry (Leviticus 27:30–32). The ordinance is fleshed out fully in Malachi 3:8–11. That tithing is indeed an ordinance is specifically mentioned by Ellen White in the context of some who keep back their tithe today as did many in Malachi’s day, complainers who say: “It does not pay to keep the ordinance of the Lord” (a paraphrase of Malachi 3:14 in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 389.1). She goes on to add: “This is not a request of man; it is one of God’s ordinances, whereby His work may be sustained and carried on in the world” (*Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 307.2–3).

3. The ordinance of **baptism**. The most obvious example of baptism occurs in Matthew 3:13–17, where John the Baptist performs baptism upon Jesus. Ellen White refers to baptism as a rite: “Jesus presented Himself to John to receive the rite of baptism”; but “John could not understand why Jesus, Who came not with confession to repentance, should need the rite of baptism when He had no sins to wash away” (*The Youth’s Instructor*, paras. 4 & 8, January 1874). She also refers to baptism as its synonym, an ordinance: “The ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are two monumental pillars” (Ms 27 ½, 1900, in *Evangelism*, p. 273.2). The ordinance of the Lord’s Supper, that second pillar, is discussed separately below.
4. The ordinance of **foot-washing** (or feet-washing), also known as the ordinance of humility or service. Jesus used the occasion in the Upper Room to demonstrate true servant leadership to His disciples by washing their feet (John 13:1–17). Ellen White confirms: “By the act of our Lord this humiliating ceremony was made a consecrated ordinance. It was to be observed by the disciples, that they might ever keep in mind His lessons of humility and service” (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 650.2). As a memorial of His humiliation, it is still in effect today: “This ordinance is Christ’s appointed preparation for the sacramental service” (*ibid.*, p. 650.3).
5. The ordinance of the **Lord’s Supper**. This ordinance replaced the Passover, which was merely a shadow of the *true* Passover, or Christ Himself. Our Saviour instituted it immediately following the ordinance of foot-washing (Matthew 26:20–29). Ellen White explains: “Jesus, prior to His death, established a memorial of the breaking of His body and the spilling of His blood for the sins of the world, in the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper” (*The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 3, p. 204.2, in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1113.1).

Notes

¹ Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed.

² *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .*, p. 221, n. 2.

³ *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, p. 816, s.v. “Ordinance.”

⁴ The Commentary Reference Series of the Seventh-day Adventist Church uniformly omits mention of marriage and tithing as bona fide ordinances, for example: the general index to *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 1118, s.v. “Ordinance of Humility” and “Ordinances, church”; and the general index to the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, vol. 12, p. 1018, s.v. “Ordinances.” The same holds true of the general index to the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (2010 ed.), p. 198, s.v. “Ordinances, church.” While this church’s official doctrinal book *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .* actually defines ordinances (see our endnote 1 above), the same endnote to the chapter “Baptism,” includes mention of Christ Himself as prescribing both baptism and the Lord’s Supper (p. 221, n. 2); yet once again the book’s index does not also include as ordinances either marriage or tithing (p. 432, s.v. “Church ordinances” and p. 440, s.v. “Ordinances,” a cross-reference to the other entry). Fortunately, the *Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White*, vol. 2, p. 1929, s.v. “Ordinance(s)” does include listings for both marriage and tithing as ordinances.