

Fasting

Fasting can be done regularly, with worship and prayer

She [Anna] had lived as a widow since then for eighty-four years. She never left the temple, *worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.* LUKE 2:37

Fasting implies and promotes earnestness in worship and prayer. When fasting, the ache and craving of hunger brings an earnestness and intensity to our worship and prayers. Fasting also promotes clarity of thought. Furthermore, our hunger serves as a reminder to worship and/or pray throughout the fasting period.

Fasting can be done on particular occasions, in petitioning God

[EZRA:] *So we fasted and asked our God for a safe journey, and he answered our prayer.* EZRA 8:23 GW

The Laying on of Hands

In conveying the gift of the Holy Spirit

Then Peter and John placed their hands on the Samaritans, and they received the Holy Spirit. ACTS 8:17

Note that the laying on of hands to convey the gift of the Holy Spirit is generally done in conjunction with the recipients coming to faith – rather than at a time chosen by those performing the act. Also, it is not essential for a person to have hands laid on them for them to receive the Holy Spirit.

In conveying blessing

After he [Jesus] took the children in his arms, *he placed his hands on them and blessed them.* MARK 10:16

In commissioning for ministry

While they were serving the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, *“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”*³*Then, after they had fasted and prayed and placed their hands on them, they sent them off.* ACTS 13:2–3

29. Significant Practices

I. Symbolic Rites

Baptism	254
The Lord’s Supper	255
Circumcision: Its Needlessness	256

II. Other Significant Practices

Confession of Jesus Christ	258
Keeping the Sabbath Holy	259
Fasting	260
The Laying on of Hands	260

I. Symbolic Rites

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are considered by many churches to be the Christian rites or sacraments. "Sacrament" comes from a Latin term meaning "military oath". The sacraments are often spoken of as being an outward sign with an inner significance. They are practiced by churches in worship ceremonies. Circumcision was also a rite practiced by God's people, under the first covenant, but has no such relevance under the second covenant.

Baptism

The Greek translated as "baptism" denotes washing in water. Opinions differ as to whether baptism need necessarily involve full immersion in water, as opposed to simply pouring or sprinkling water on the person being baptized.

God's people are baptized in the "name" of Jesus Christ

On hearing this, *they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.*

ACTS 19:5 ESV

Being baptized in or into the "name" of Jesus Christ, is in part a declaration of our identification and relationship with Jesus Christ, and our commitment or allegiance to him. This explanation reflects both the meaning of the Latin from which "sacrament" comes – military oath (as commented above) – and the concept of being united with Christ (discussed in the following subsection).

Baptism into Jesus Christ signifies being united with him – with the corresponding implications

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] How can we who died as far as sin is concerned go on living in it? ³Or don't you know that *all of us who were baptized into union with the Messiah Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore, through baptism we were buried with him into his death so that, just as the Messiah was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too may live an entirely new life. ⁵For if we have become united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.* ROMANS 6:2B–5 ISV

Keeping the Sabbath Holy

Observe the Sabbath as holy by resting on it

[GOD, TO THE ISRAELITES:] *"Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. ⁹You have six days in which to do your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to me. On that day no one is to work—neither you, your children, your slaves, your animals, nor the foreigners who live in your country. ¹¹In six days I, the LORD, made the earth, the sky, the sea, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested. That is why I, the LORD, blessed the Sabbath and made it holy.*

EXODUS 20:8–11 GNT

Israel was to observe the Sabbath as a sign of being God's people, identifying themselves with him by resting on the seventh day as he did. The necessity for Christians to observe the Sabbath has been the subject of debate.

Observing the Sabbath enables people to be refreshed

For six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you must cease, in order that your ox and your donkey may rest and that your female servant's son and any hired help may refresh themselves.

EXODUS 23:12

It is permissible to do good and necessary things on the Sabbath

A man was there who had a withered hand. And they asked Jesus, *"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"* so that they could accuse him. ¹¹*He said to them, "Would not any one of you, if he had one sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, take hold of it and lift it out? ¹²How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."* ¹³*Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out and it was restored, as healthy as the other.* MATTHEW 12:10–13

Verses that may suggest we do not need to keep the Sabbath

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] *Therefore do not let anyone judge you with respect to food or drink, or in the matter of a feast, new moon, or Sabbath days – ¹⁷these are only the shadow of the things to come, but the reality is Christ!* COLOSSIANS 2:16–17

II. Other Significant Practices

It is important for each Christian to understand all significant church practices. Confessing Jesus Christ is one such practice that we need to understand – and be prepared to do. The weekly Sabbath is to some extent ignored by a lot of Christians, many seeing it as not relevant in the new covenant – but a number of theologians would “beg to differ”. Reasons for and against observing it are included here. Fasting is a practice that is a very valuable supplement to such things as prayer and worship. The laying on of hands is a further common practice, and so we should also be familiar with its significance and use in the Bible.

Confession of Jesus Christ

Confessing Jesus Christ is an expression of allegiance to him, as Lord, and involves stating what one believes about him. It is often done formally at one’s baptism and corporately in church with the recital of creeds or “confessions”. In addition, many Christians will experience times in which they should acknowledge Jesus Christ and their faith in him before unbelievers – often at the cost or risk of being persecuted.

Confess Jesus Christ, before others

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, partners in a heavenly calling, take note of *Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess*, ...

HEBREWS 3:1

[JESUS:] I tell you, whoever *acknowledges me before men*, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before God’s angels. LUKE 12:8

Things to confess about Jesus Christ

For the Jewish leaders had already agreed that anyone who *confessed Jesus to be the Christ* would be put out of the synagogue. JOHN 9:22B

And everyone will *confess that Jesus Christ is Lord* and bring glory to God the Father. PHILIPPIANS 2:11 NCV™

If anyone *confesses that Jesus is the Son of God*, God resides in him and he in God. 1 JOHN 4:15

After indicating that baptism signifies the spiritual union of the believer with Christ (v. 3), Paul draws parallels between baptism and other aspects of this spiritual union. Paul appears to parallel one’s immersion in water at baptism, with being immersed in death with Christ in his death (vv. 3–4a, 5a). As such, baptism portrays the death of our old self which was enslaved to sin (cf. vv. 6–7), and so a death to sin (v. 2b). Subsequently baptism symbolizes one being raised up in union with Christ to live a new spiritual life (vv. 4b, 5b).

Baptism signifies belief

But when they believed Philip as he was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they began to be baptized, both men and women. ACTS 8:12

Baptism is a declaration and confirmation of belief.

Baptism signifies the washing away of sins

[ANANIAS, TO SAUL:] And now what are you waiting for? Get up, *be baptized, and have your sins washed away*, calling on his name.

ACTS 22:16

This should not be interpreted to mean that baptism in itself brings the forgiveness of sin. Rather, the external washing in water is symbolic of one’s spiritual cleansing.

The Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s Supper is regularly practiced in churches. It primarily symbolizes and commemorates Jesus Christ’s death for us. The breaking of the bread symbolizes the breaking of his body, and the pouring out of the wine symbolizes the pouring out of his blood.

Observe the Lord’s Supper – in remembrance of Jesus Christ and his death

[PAUL, TO THE CORINTHIAN BELIEVERS:] For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you, that *the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread*, ²⁴*and after he had given thanks he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in*

remembrance of me.”²⁵In the same way, he also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, every time you drink it, in remembrance of me.” 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23–25

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (v. 25), speaks of Jesus Christ’s blood, shed in his death, introducing the new relationship – or covenant – between God and his people. In part at least this was achieved by his death bringing forgiveness for the sins of God’s people. The shedding of his blood inaugurated the new covenant and ratified or sealed it (cf. AMP, GNT, NCV, NLT) – just as the sprinkling of “the blood of the covenant” by Moses ceremonially confirmed the old covenant (cf. Exodus 24:5–8).

Participating in the Lord’s Supper also symbolizes participating in the blood and body of Jesus Christ

[PAUL, TO THE CORINTHIAN BELIEVERS:] *The cup of blessing that we bless is a sign of our sharing in the blood of the Messiah, isn’t it? The bread that we break is a sign of our sharing in the body of the Messiah, isn’t it? ¹⁷Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, because all of us partake of the one loaf.* 1 CORINTHIANS 10:16–17 ISV

The two rhetorical questions in v. 16 appear to imply that drinking from the cup and eating of the bread – in addition to remembering Jesus Christ and his death – symbolize one’s participation in what Christ’s death accomplished, i.e. forgiveness and thus salvation. However, in view of v. 17, the second rhetorical question may well additionally or alternatively mean that eating from the one loaf of bread symbolizes one being part of and participating in Christ’s body, the church.

Circumcision: Its Needlessness

Circumcision of males is the cutting off of the foreskin. Jewish males undergo circumcision in keeping with both God’s covenant with Abraham (their ancestor), and God’s covenant and law for Israel, i.e. the Mosaic Law.

In regard to God’s covenant and law for Israel, being circumcised signifies one’s adherence to the law – on which the covenant was based – as the way to righteousness. This is in contrast to and at

odds with the way of faith in Jesus Christ, which God introduced in conjunction with the new covenant.

Circumcision does not bring salvation

Now some men came down from Judea [to the church at Antioch] and began to teach the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”²When Paul and Barnabas had a major argument and debate with them, the church appointed Paul and Barnabas and some others from among them to go up to meet with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this point of disagreement. ... [PETER:] “On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are.” ACTS 15:1–2, 11

In v. 11 the apostle Peter sides emphatically with Paul and Barnabas (v. 2), indicating that circumcision and adherence to the OT law (which circumcision symbolizes) do not bring salvation.

Circumcision is of no consequence for believers

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision carries any weight – the only thing that matters is faith working through love. GALATIANS 5:6

Rather, it is our hearts that should be circumcised

Therefore, *circumcise your heart and stop being stubborn.* DEUTERONOMY 10:16 ISV

Circumcision of the heart involves changing to become responsive to God. It involves “cutting off” the rigidity of sin from a person’s heart.

Remember the persecuted