

Baptism: Where did you get the authority?

by Jim Richards

Matthew 21:23-27

This is an interpretation I have held for almost 35 years. For 21 years as a pastor I was fortunate enough to have churches that followed my leadership on this matter. I am shocked that some Southern Baptists debate the need for immersion for church membership. I am disappointed that some Southern Baptists receive members from non-New Testament churches. We are about to lose our identity as Baptists if we abdicate the necessity of New Testament church authority for baptism. We face the threat of evangelical ecumenism.

Jesus was harassed by the religionists of his day. One item that came into question was his authority for ministry. The opposition sought to trap Jesus, but he caught them in their own snare. Jesus used the issue of John's authority to baptize to rebuke them.

Since Jesus used the issue of baptismal authority as a defense, we cannot minimize its importance. Actually, it is an issue in our churches. During the time of liberal influence in our seminaries, the teaching of historic Baptist ecclesiology was largely abandoned. Since biblical inerrancy was disregarded by many, true Baptist distinctives became expendable.

We have two generations that know little about who they are and what they are. Because of liberalism in the sideline (formerly, "mainline") denominations, Southern Baptist churches have been flooded with their parishioners seeking membership. Have you ever wondered why SBC total membership continues to go up while baptism numbers continue to decline?

Is one baptism as good as the other? Article 7 in the Baptist Faith and Message confessional statement addresses the issue for Southern Baptists. "Church Ordinance" is the optimum term in this article. In Article 6 we have the definition of a New Testament church. You see, something or someone has the authority to baptize as Jesus said. The way we answer this issue will determine the composition of our convention.

There are three questions we need to ask in order to bring clarification about the doctrine of authority for baptism. The first question is...

Is the authority individual or congregational?

A belief about the doctrine of the church determines much of the approach to baptism. Jesus instituted the ordinance of baptism within the church. Jesus did not baptize but his disciples did (John 4:1-2). Jesus committed the authority of baptism to the church in Matthew 28:18-20.

Listen to what the founder of Union University, T.T. Eaton, had to say about who could baptize: "Baptists affirm that New Testament baptism is the immersion in water in the name of the Trinity of a believer on the profession of his faith by one duly set apart by a church for such service." There was virtually no debate among Southern Baptists during our early years on who had the authority to baptize.

John the Baptist received a commission from God to baptize (John 1:6). Jesus submitted to his baptism. Jesus was baptized to declare his Messiahship. Baptism is not procurative, but declarative. Jesus did not become the Son of God at baptism—he proclaimed that he was the Son of God. In like manner believers testify that we already are the children of God.

Jesus transferred the authority to baptize to the church in his final remarks before ascending into Heaven. Had he given the authority to the apostles, then we would have to believe in apostolic succession for proper baptism. Had he given the authority to the individual believers, any 6-year-old child who is a believer could baptize any convert anywhere.

Every baptism in the book of Acts can be attributed to a local church or her missionary agents. People who were saved at Pentecost submitted to the church for baptism (Acts 2:41-42). With the exception of the Ethiopian eunuch every convert was baptized and immediately joined or formed a congregation. The Scripture is silent about the end of the Ethiopian's story, so it is pure conjecture that he started a church or baptized anyone himself.

Mutual accountability and a faith community are tied to congregational authority of baptism. American individualism has clouded our thinking on this basic practice of the New Testament. The authority for baptism is congregational.

The second question we need to ask about the authority of baptism is ...

Is the authority objective or subjective?

I have heard pastors say that as long as the person feels satisfied with his baptism, it is acceptable. I have heard others say that even though the church or individual who performed the baptism believed in falling from grace, sprinkling for baptism or baptismal regeneration, that as long as the believer did not accept those doctrines his or her baptism is valid. This makes baptismal authority subjective to the individual's personal opinion rather than biblical objective truth. Acts 19 is an example that not just any baptism is sufficient. Paul required those who had been immersed to be "re-baptized."

Culture has become so self-absorbed that experience is now the final authority. Truth is whatever you want it to be. Forty years of neo-orthodoxy did more than undermine a belief in the nature of Scripture as the inerrant Word of God. By undermining the Bible, doctrinal orthodoxy has suffered correspondingly.

Baptism is for believers only (Acts 8:36-38). Baptism is by immersion only (Colossians 2:12). Baptism gives a testimony of Christ's resurrection and a believer's new life (Romans 6:3-4).

In the state where I serve the Alamo stands in San Antonio as a reminder of the 232 Americans who gave their lives on March 6, 1836 so that others might live free. Millions have been martyred through the last 20 centuries for believer's baptism, which was a testimony of their faith in Christ. They died for a biblical doctrine we treat too cheaply. We must never lose sight of the objective truth that places value on the proper mode (immersion), the proper candidate (believer) and the proper authority (church). The third question ...

Is the authority temporary or permanent?

The ultimate factor is that scriptural baptism can only be administered by a New Testament church. Hershel Hobbs emphasized this: "All Christian groups which practice baptism hold that it should precede the Lord's Supper. Baptists say the same thing. The question is, 'What constitutes New Testament baptism?' Thus the difference between Baptists and others is at this point, not about the Supper. Therefore, if Baptists are 'closed' anything they are 'closed baptismists.'" If Hobbs was correct, we need to know the definition of a true New Testament church?

Allow me to submit a few irreducible marks. A true New Testament church has the following identifying marks:

- It consists of baptized believers in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41).
- The Bible is its final rule of faith and practice (Acts 2:42). No extra-biblical revelations can equal the Word of God.
- It preaches salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone—which includes eternal security of the believer (Hebrews 10:39).
- It is an autonomous Theo-democracy (Acts 1:15-26). Local church autonomy is under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Sadly, some Baptist churches are not New Testament churches. And some that have a different name than "Baptist" may well be a church of Jesus Christ. What a church believes and practices is what makes it a New Testament church—not the name over the door.

There are four levels of fellowship and cooperation. Individuals can relate under the blood of Christ. This is a common bond of all believers. Evangelistically, people and groups can work together when in agreement with the gospel message.

Article 15 of the Baptist Faith and Message states: Christians should be ready to work with "all men of good will in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth." This means in social and moral concerns we are to cooperate for the betterment of human society. Two issues that come to mind are the sanctity of human life and the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman.

Where baptismal authority directly relates fellowship and cooperation is in missions. Here, we can only work with those of like faith and practice.

We are not to be legalistic, but we are to follow biblical principles. The church will be here when Jesus comes. It will continue until that time carrying on his work.

Where do you get your authority to do what you do? The same place John and Jesus did. We get our authority from the Father, through the Spirit by the Word.

When I was a young preacher, my burden was to start a church in French Catholic South Louisiana. It was a closed culture 30 years ago. It was my privilege to see a move of God. More than 100 people came to Christ and were baptized in the first year.

The man who helped start the church was a man I got to lead to Christ. Elzie Joseph Monceaux told me that if he was baptized his family would disown him. They indeed did, but because of his obedience hundreds have come to Christ and the church is still a witness for Christ today.

God has not called us to be successful or popular. He has called us to be faithful.