

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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The First Baptist Distinctive

Part Two: New Testament Authority

I have previously argued that none of the fundamentals of the faith should be named as Baptist distinctives, for belief in the fundamentals never distinguishes Baptists from other Christians. Specifically, I asserted that the affirmation of biblical authority is a fundamental of the faith, and should not be listed as a Baptist distinctive. Nevertheless, we find that many lists of Baptist distinctives begin by naming biblical authority. This is a serious misunderstanding of Baptist principles.

Baptists do affirm a distinctive that seems similar to biblical authority, but once it is understood, the difference is significant. The distinction between the two is fairly important because this particular Baptist distinctive is crucial for several of the others. The genuine distinctive that sets Baptists apart from many other groups of Christians is the absolute authority of the New Testament in all matters of church faith and order.

What does this mean? How is it different from the Christian fundamental of biblical authority? Perhaps I should answer these questions by first saying what it does *not* mean.

When Baptists affirm the authority of the New Testament for the faith and order of the church, they are *not* rejecting or ignoring the general authority of the Old Testament. Baptists agree with all Christians that *all* of the Scripture—Old and New Testaments alike—is both

inspired (God-breathed) and profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). Baptists hold the Old Testament in high esteem indeed.

The Bible, however, is divided into two sections for a reason. In the outworking of God's plan, a new stage was entered when God the Son was born as a human being, died on the cross, and arose from the dead. Something has changed in the way that God is dealing with the human race.

Baptists insist that the present form of the church is uniquely a New Testament institution. Israel and the church may or may not be one and the same body—Baptists disagree about that point. Even Baptists who believe that Israel was the Old Testament church, however, agree that the form and order of the church changed significantly with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even if the church existed in the Old Testament, its pattern of organization and mode of operation were dramatically altered by events that stemmed from the ministry of the Lord Jesus.

Therefore, where should we look to discover what is the church's nature, mission, and order? Baptists insist that the only textbook on the church is the New Testament. Only the New Testament tells us what the church is. Only the New Testament tells us what the church is supposed to do. Only the New Testament tells us how the church is supposed to be organized. In fact, when Baptists speak about the church, they often specify that it is the "New Testament Church" that they have in mind.

The sole authority of the New Testament for church faith and order is the first principle of Baptists, but this does not mean that Baptists are the only ones who have acknowledged it. Ulrich Zwingli, the famous Reformer of Zurich, articulated this principle clearly. In fact, it was from Zwingli that Anabaptists such as Conrad Grebel first learned it. The chief bone of contention between Grebel and Zwingli lay exactly here: the Anabaptists charged that Zwingli applied the principle of New Testament authority inconsistently when it came to infant baptism. The authority of the New Testament has also been a guiding principle of the Stone-Campbell movement (Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ). Thus, Baptists are not alone in adhering to the absolute authority of the New Testament for church faith and order. Baptists, however, are among those who have made it they key to their understanding of the church.

As I have already stated, their emphasis upon the New Testament does not mean that Baptists ignore or depreciate the Old Testament in any way. Many doctrines are revealed in the Old Testament with great clarity. Baptists rely upon the Old Testament to help them understand the nature of God, the depth of human sinfulness, and the necessity of redemption. The church in its present form, however, is *not* revealed in the Old Testament. The doctrine and order of the church is revealed only in the New.

Baptists affirm the authority and sufficiency of Scripture because they are Christians, and the inspiration and authority of the Bible is one of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. Baptists hold this doctrine in common with all true Christians of whatever denomination. Christians from other denominations, however, frequently argue that some aspect of church polity or doctrine can be found in the Old Testament. Quite often they base this argument on the observation that Israel was the church of the Old Testament.

Many—perhaps even most—Baptists agree that Israel was the church of the Old Testament. Most Baptists have not been dispensationalists and most dispensationalists have not been Baptists. All Baptists insist, however, that something changed with the cross and resurrection of Jesus and with the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. That change deeply affected the constitution, purpose, membership and order of the church. Therefore, one cannot simply appeal to God’s people in the Old Testament to establish the pattern for the church in the New Testament.

Baptists are adamant that only the New Testament may be used to establish the doctrine and structure of the church. Thus, Baptists are different from most other Christians because they restrict their doctrine of the church to the New Testament. They also differ from many other Christians in the way that they apply the teachings of the New Testament to church faith and order. Baptists are characterized by the use of the Rule of Prescription or (to use Reformed terminology) the Regulative Principle. But that is another conversation. ✘

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Psalm 119:73-80

Thy hands have made me and fashioned me:
give me understanding, that I may learn thy commandments.

They that fear thee will be glad when they see me;
because I have hoped in thy word.

I know, O LORD, that thy judgments are right,
and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me.

Let, I pray thee, thy merciful kindness be for my comfort,
according to thy word unto thy servant.

Let thy tender mercies come unto me, that I may live:
for thy law is my delight.

Let the proud be ashamed; for they dealt perversely with me
without a cause:
but I will meditate in thy precepts.

Let those that fear thee turn unto me,
and those that have known thy testimonies.

Let my heart be sound in thy statutes;
that I be not ashamed. ✠

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