


JOHN 5:30-47
WHY I AM A BAPTIST

Jesus said to the Jews who were seeking to kill Him, “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me. If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not deemed true. There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”¹

ome years ago, I invited several Baptist pastors to bring a message telling why each one was a Baptist. Among those who accepted that invitation to address the congregation were a denominational leader and several prominent pastors from within the communion with which I was then affiliated. After they had spoken, with one exception, the congregation still did not know why any was a Baptist.

The denominational leader chided the congregation and chastised me for being “too independent.” He pled with the church to be more co-operative within the denomination, which co-operation was determined by money sent to the hindquarters. One man listed a number of benefits for “belonging” to the denomination, focusing primarily on the moneys that would flow to the church. Yet another of these fellow elders presented an energetic and entertaining apologia for a denominational expression of Christianity that could well have been delivered by any evangelical Christian.

Mostly, we received a series of sociological arguments devoid of doctrinal support; and we were told the benefits of denominational membership without reference to doctrine. Truth compels me to reject any ecclesiastical association without doctrinal foundation; mere fellowship is insufficient for religious co-operation. Missionary enterprise alone is insufficient for extended ecclesiastical co-operation. Any congregational association that seeks to honour Christ must have a doctrinal foundation.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version** © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

To claim the name Baptist is to identify oneself doctrinally—it is not merely a means of situating oneself denominationally. To appropriate the name Baptist implies that a person holds convictions concerning certain truths; she or he is convinced of the veracity of those particular truths. It is my stated conviction that any Baptist should be able to state the reason for his faith and practise. Any Baptist should be able to say why she is a Baptist, whether she shares in the life of one of the more than forty-five Baptist groups within North America, or whether she belongs to an independent congregation. To say one is a Baptist is to aver a doctrinal position unique from other communions. Ultimately, all ecclesiastical associations are on a doctrinal basis.

I was not “born” a Baptist. I was “born again” a child of the Living God and having come to faith I adopted Baptist convictions. I was not raised in a Baptist church. I was not induced to become a Baptist out of convenience or through promises of support. Almost without exception, denominational leaders representing several Baptist groups have made promises to me only to fail to honour their word. It is fair to say that I was not led to my Baptist convictions through the veracity of any of a number of Baptist leaders. Nevertheless, I confess that I have devoured Baptist preaching, rejoicing in the power of the pulpit exemplified by great contemporary Baptist preachers. To this day, I thrill to hear great preaching, and Baptists convictions create an atmosphere for great preaching.

When I was saved, I began to read the Word of God. As I read that blessed Word, I drafted a list of major doctrines broadly representative of the whole of Christendom. All of these doctrines were at first questionable in my mind since I was so new to the Faith. As I read the Word of God, I determined that each doctrine or practise claiming doctrinal authority was either true or fictitious; the basis for my determination was whether biblical support was present or absent for each doctrine or practise. Shortly, as result of reading the Word of God, I came to the realisation that I was a Baptist. Without seeking to become a Baptist, through carefully reading the Word of the Living God, I discovered that I held Baptist convictions.

The great Baptist principles—principles that mark Baptists as a distinctive people—are discovered in the Word of God. These principles are as follow:

- **Authority of the Word of God,**
- **Autonomy of the local church,**
- **Acceptance of Two Officers within the Church,**
- **Regenerate Church Membership,**
- **Maintenance of the Ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Table,**
- **Priesthood of the Believer,**
- **Individual Soul Liberty,**
- **the Separation of Church and State.**

To be certain, the text before us does not present all eight of these great distinctive truths that mark the people known as Baptists, but several great doctrines which suffice to present strong reasons for adherence to Baptist principles are presented. I invite consideration of the Master’s interaction with religious dilettantes—unbelievers wearing the guise of worshippers of the True and Living God.

I AM A BAPTIST BECAUSE BAPTISTS BELIEVE THE WORD OF GOD. “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me.” Above all else, Baptists are a people of the Book. We baptise by immersion for no other reason than that it is commanded in the Book. Even if we were unable to read the text in the original language we would nevertheless understand that baptism is intended to portray the burial and resurrection of Christ just as the one baptised identifies with Him through this act of obedience [cf. **ROMANS 6:1-11**].

As Baptists, we cannot go beyond the Book in Faith and practise, but neither may we do less than that which is required by the Book. This is the reason we cannot accept any action that denies the necessity of being born from above before identifying with the Master. This is the reason we cannot condone sprinkling innocent babies in order to make them Christians. We insist on the authority of the Word of God that only those who are redeemed may identify with the Risen Lord of Glory.

Baptists believe in the autonomy of the local congregation. Who taught us that doctrine? We believe that those who come to faith should be baptised following their confession and that the baptism they receive should be by immersion. Where did we discover that truth? We believe in the separation of church and state, though not separation of church from state, insisting that the ideal political condition is that represented by a free church in a free state. From whence did that conviction arise?

Every conviction we hold is firmly rooted in the Bible. We hold the Bible to be the Word of God—inerrant and infallible—a perfect rule of faith and practise. In faith and practise, we go no further than the Bible leads us; but we dare do no less than that which the Word of God teaches. We have determined that the preaching of the Word will be central in our worship simply because we realise that as a people of the Book we need to hear what the Living God says as His Spirit speaks through His written Word.

Some may object that this confession of reliance upon the Word of God is not unique to Baptists, and I gladly concede the point. We rejoice in each evangelical congregation that affirms this truth; however, we are unapologetic in insisting that historically this was a position that distinguished us as Baptist. Firm adherence to this doctrinal persuasion led our forefathers to resist every pressure to emulate the assorted religious societies that sought to employ the state in advancing their religious goals. It was this firm belief in the authority of the Scriptures that led our forefathers to resist the push to treat baptism as a means of salvation; thus, because of our confidence in the written Word we refused to baptise our infants. We Baptists are who we are today primarily because of our absolute confidence in the authority of the written Word of God.

Isn't it amazing that Baptists have held to this position throughout the long years despite persistent opposition from a majority of religious societies? What is more wonderful still is that many other religions and churches now join us in making this same confession. I do not wish to leave the impression that we live in the dim past; rather we hold that we are obligated to examine our faith and our practise in light of this written Word. We cannot yield on the issue of membership, allowing the unbaptised to unite as fellow members. We cannot yield on the issue of baptism as the symbol of faith in the Crucified and Risen Son of God. Neither can we move one millimetre from our insistence that God has given us this Word as the sole rule of faith and practise. We seek to implement what is written in the Word of God because we believe the Book is divine. It is divine in its origin, it is divine in its preservation and it is divine in its intent.

In the text, Jesus pointed to multiple witnesses to His Person. He spoke of His own witness [vv. 30, 31]. He pointed to the witness of John the Baptist, whom the leaders recognised as a popular figure despite refusing to believe him [v. 33]. Jesus pointed to the works that He had performed [v. 36]. These miraculous works were in addition to the witness of the Father Himself [v. 37]. Finally, the Master stated that the Scriptures themselves—especially the writings of Moses—testified to Him [v. 39]. Later, Jesus would add that the testimony of the Holy Spirit [JOHN 15:26] and the testimony of individual believers [JOHN 15:27] demonstrated the reality of His origin and His being.

While Jesus spoke of the multiplied witnesses to His Person and His work, the message this day is focused on the testimony of Scripture. There are “no less than eighteen unmistakable references to the Old Testament” in the Book of John. Most of these references have direct application to Christ.² Thus, if Moses wrote about Him, the question would need to be asked how these religious leaders failed to recognise Him. That question lies at the heart of our Baptist Faith.

Examine some of the incidents John records that cite the Old Testament Scriptures as pointing to Jesus as the Christ. In JOHN 1:45, we read, “Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him *of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote*, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’”

Referring to Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, the evangelist writes in JOHN 2:22, “When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and *they believed the Scripture* and the word that Jesus had spoken.”

As He discussed with Nicodemus the need to be born from above, Jesus asked, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things” [JOHN 3:10]? Clearly, one who studied the Scriptures as Nicodemus had done, would be expected to understand spiritual issues, especially the need for an individual to be divinely born into the Family of God.

In our text, Jesus challenges the religious leaders, “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for *he wrote of me*” [JOHN 5:45, 46].

Carson comments on the ignorance of these religious leaders. “What is at stake is a comprehensive hermeneutical key. By predictive prophecy, by type, by revelatory event and by anticipatory statute, what we call the Old Testament is understood to point to Christ, His ministry, His teaching, His death and resurrection.”³

John, writing in the third person of himself, speaks of the transformation to belief as he viewed the empty tomb, commenting about the lack of understanding of the disciples prior to the Resurrection. He says of himself and Peter, as well as the other disciples, “as yet *they did not understand the Scripture*, that he must rise from the dead” [JOHN 20:9].

We read the Word of God in order to know God; and we discover Christ on each page. We see His Spirit at work throughout the Word and thus we yield to the Word and discover that His Spirit works also in us as we submit to that same Word. The Scriptures are not an end to themselves—they point us to Christ. Spurgeon’s advice to young theologues learning the craft of sermon construction was to begin on any page of the Word and make a beeline for the Cross of Christ. There is wisdom in that statement.

² Merrill C. Tenney, **John: The Gospel of Belief** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1948, 1976) 110-1

³ D. A. Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1991) 263

Likewise, we must be careful not to become so engrossed in detail that we miss the message of the Word. Truth lies on every page, but truth consists not in merely knowing what the Word says, but rather in submitting to the truth of the Word. Scripture does not give us life; rather, it is the Lord revealed through the Scriptures who gives life. Woe to that individual who reads the Word of God and fails to hear the clarion voice of the Risen Son of God speaking to his or her heart.

I am a Baptist because the Word of God points me to Christ; and in Christ the Lord there is life eternal. I am a Baptist because the Word of God directs my steps into paths pleasing to the True and Living God, and I am comforted as His beloved child. I am a Baptist because the Word of God reveals to me the mind of God and gives me wisdom for daily living. It is this Word that guides me now and which shall guide me to my eternal home.

I AM A BAPTIST BECAUSE BAPTISTS BELIEVE IN A REGENERATE CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

“You refuse to come to Me that you may have life.” Flowing from the words of the Book is the knowledge that a New Testament church is a spiritual entity. Thus, a church should be composed of spiritual people. And though those people are not perfect—for weeds will be found interspersed among the wheat—the reality does not change the ideal. Scripture convinces us that only those who provide a testimony of faith should be members. Moreover, only those who give evidence that they have believed the message of life in the Risen Son of God through open identification with Him are to hold membership in the New Testament congregation. These convictions arise because of our primary emphasis upon the authority and integrity of the written Word of God.

The objection is sometimes raised against the concept of the believers’ church that it is an ideal and therefore sinners may actually be counted as part of the church. That such is often the case cannot be denied. God knows those who are believers and when the “Assembly of the Firstborn” [HEBREWS 12:23] is at last revealed only those whose names are recorded in the “Book of Life” [REVELATION 20:15] will be present. It is precisely because God has a standard for salvation that we believe in a regenerate church membership, and thus we hold to the practise of the believers’ church. The ideal is kept pure through admitting only those who profess regeneration, and therefore the temporal must adhere to the same standard in so far as mere mortals are capable of maintaining that standard.

I am certainly aware that there exist individuals who claim membership in the “universal church” and who therefore protest that they have no need to be part of a believers’ church. To any such sharing our worship, I relate an incident from the life of the far-famed R. G. Lee, long pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. On one occasion a woman expressed her desire to sing in the Bellevue Church choir. Dr. Lee inquired about her church affiliation and she informed him that she was a member of “the invisible church.” Lee purportedly replied, “Fine, sing in their choir.” If the incident did not occur, it should have occurred, for it illustrates the point that the “invisible church” or the “universal church” has little applicability in the present era beyond the expression that it finds through the ministry of local congregations.⁴

⁴ This story is related in footnote 14, Paige Patterson, **The Church in the Twenty-First Century** (chap.) in Timothy George and Richard D. Land, **Baptist Why and Why Not Revisited** (Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN 1997) 122

Referring to the text, I note that Jesus pointed out to the religious leaders that despite their familiarity with the Scriptures, they had an errant hermeneutic which so blinded them that they were incapable of recognising truth when openly confronted by it. The Bible had been reduced to a textbook of arcane information dictating the minutia of religious life. It is not enough to claim to believe the Book; we need a guide to assist us in reading the Book. We need the Spirit of God to direct our understanding.

Listen to Paul's admonition to the Corinthian saints. "Among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him’—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. 'For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ" [1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-16].

Only the child of God has any possibility of understanding what God is doing in the world. This is according to Jesus' own testimony. "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" [JOHN 15:15]. Here, Jesus attests that His disciples now have a full and complete revelation of the mind of the Father provided in the Word of God. Moreover, the Spirit of God becomes the guarantor of understanding for the child of God: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you" [JOHN 16:13-15].

I point out these truths because those who are born from above reveal their divine parentage through devotion to doing those things that honour the Father. This is the reason the New Testament church is considered a divine entity and the members of the New Testament church must be regenerate. The regenerate congregation will be able to distinguish between religious exercise and worship. They know where the Spirit is leading and they willingly follow. They delight to discover the will of the Father and courageously perform that will through the life of the Body.

Those who do not have the Spirit of Christ do not belong to Him, and therefore, as unspiritual people, they can neither please God nor know the mind of God. The Apostle has clearly stated the issue in his letter to the Roman saints. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” [ROMANS 8:1-9].

We do not deliberately make unconscious infants and unregenerate individuals members of our congregations. When those who profess faith prove unfaithful to the cause of Christ, we hold them accountable to the Word of God. This attitude and action distinguishes us from much of the religious world. All hinges on the approach to Scripture and our submission to what God has caused to be written down.

I AM A BAPTIST BECAUSE BAPTISTS BELIEVE IN SOUL COMPETENCY AND SOUL LIBERTY.

“You do not receive Me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” These are two great concepts that are poorly understood. Unfortunately, many people have distorted these precious truths into an excuse for infidelity instead of accepting the responsibility imposed by these doctrines.

What is meant by these terms? When you hear the term “religious liberty,” you should think of freedom to believe or not to believe. The concept is political, insisting that the state cannot dictate in matters of conscience. Government has no role in promoting one religion as licit while condemning another as illicit. The concept that there is “a wall of separation between church and state” is both unbiblical and opposed to liberty. Furthermore, the concept of “separation of church and state” has no basis in the history of political thought, only coming to prominence recently when Thomas Jefferson coined the term in response to a question raised by the Danbury Baptist Association.

Baptists in another era referred to this doctrine of liberty by the term “soul freedom.” By this, they meant that the individual was free to read and interpret the Bible for himself. It did not exclude the need for teachers, but it did place responsibility for what one believed on the individual. The concept embraces the freedom to worship as one pleases, or even not to worship. This is a Baptist principle. A Baptist will rise at midnight to plead with a neighbour to repent and believe the Good News of Christ, but no Baptist would lift a finger to coerce another into believing the truths of God’s Word. We will admonish and we will plead and we will reason; but we can never coerce belief lest we violate conscience—our own and the conscience of those whom we might seek to compel to believe.

You will notice that Jesus said “you do not receive Me.” Though His words register disappointment, there is not a hint of coercion. The final offer of the Word of God supports this tenet, “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” [REVELATION 22:17]. This is but a continuation of the Old Testament offer through Isaiah.

“Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.”

[ISAIAH 55:1]

God values the individual, and so do we. A Baptist divine wrote long ago, “We hold that the individual is endowed with the inalienable right to worship or not worship God according to the dictates of his conscience and the right of free choice. This right is irrevocable and must be kept inviolate. The only part government and society can have in this sacred right is to protect it and guarantee the free exercise thereof.”⁵

The term “soul competency” means that each individual is competent to come into the presence of God through Jesus Christ. We need no mediator other than Christ Jesus whom God has appointed. Paul states, “There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time” [1 TIMOTHY 2:5, 6].

Soul competency implies that the individual is created in the image of God. Because each of us is in the image of God, this means that each of us is responsible to God. Therefore, this is a competency under God and not a competency without God. This divine doctrine implies competency under the guidance of the Bible. There is no competency to worship apart from the Bible, the written Word of the Living God.⁶

The religious leaders whom Jesus confronted that day were ignorant of the purpose of Scripture, though they were well educated in the minutiae of what had been written. They revealed that they had no competency before God. Jesus exposed their fraudulent nature by stripping away the religious veneer. They were revealed as accepting praise from one another instead of seeking the praise that comes from God. They were fixated on promoting their own wills over the will of God.

This doctrine of soul competency is expressed through our willingness to submit to the Word of God. The proper employment of the truth is revealed when an individual confesses Christ and submits to baptism as revealed through the Word of God. The misuse of the truth is revealed by the individual that refuses obedience to the teaching of the Word and refuses membership in the local congregation as taught in the Word. By the same criterion, the misuse of this precious doctrine is expressed by the congregation that fails to act to insist that the doctrine be applied in matters of faith and practise.

⁵ W. R. White, **Baptist Distinctives** (Convention Press, Nashville, TN 1946) 12

⁶ cf. J. Clyde Turner, **Our Baptist Heritage** (The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, TN 1945) 35-47

Our understanding of the church derives from two sources—the authority of the Bible and our emphasis upon the competency of the soul before God. The authority of the Word of God compels us to submit to that Word, and within that written Word, we discover the truth concerning the competency of the soul.

I recall an incident that occurred during the time I was engaged in teaching at Criswell College in Dallas. Dr. Paige Patterson and Dr. Richard Land had called me in for an interview regarding continuation of my contract to teach at that institution. They wanted to renew my contract, but they had some concerns about my commitment to the Southern Baptist Convention. “It has been reported,” Dr. Patterson intoned, “that you are going about the country saying that you are a ‘Christian first,’ a ‘Baptist’ second, and a ‘Southern Baptist’ third.”

“Well,” I replied, “I can relieve your concerns; I never said I was a Southern Baptist.” Dear people, I am a Baptist by conviction, believing in the great Baptist doctrines of soul competency and soul liberty, but I am not wed to a denomination.

I am a Baptist because I am convinced of the accuracy and the authority of the Word of God. I receive this written Word as inerrant and infallible. It is a perfect rule for faith and practise and I gladly embrace it as the very Word of God. Flowing from this truth of biblical authority and accuracy, I am a Baptist because I find in the Scriptures the teachings that historically distinguished the first Christians and throughout history have distinguished Baptists. In particular, I am convinced of the need for a regenerate church membership—a Baptist principle that has throughout history distinguished Baptist people. Moreover, from the Word of God, I am convinced of the Baptist doctrines of religious freedom and soul competency.

I have not addressed such great historic Baptist distinctives as the ordinances of the church or the autonomy of the local church. Neither have I discussed the doctrine of Baptist ecclesiology as related to the church officers. One reason for this neglect is that it did not occur directly in this text, and another reason is that these truths will derive from the truths I have discussed. The truths I have discussed are central and crucial to the Baptist Identity. These truths speak of inalienable rights of the individual—rights defended by Baptists throughout the history of the churches.

On occasion I have been asked, “Pastor, what would you be if you were not a Baptist?”

The answer to that question is short and simple. ***I would be ashamed.***

Our invitation to those who share this service is to consider Christ and His Word. We issue a call to believe the Word of God and to receive the teaching of Christ our Lord. We wish that every Christian was a Baptist, but honesty compels us to admit that we would rather that people went to Heaven “drip dried” than being dipped only to go to hell because they never believed. We keep the order straight—repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ are to be expressed through obedience to the clear command of the Lord.

Who today says, “I believe Jesus is the Son of God. I believe that He died because of my sin and rose for my justification.” Come, confessing that He is Master of your life. Who today comes, openly prepared to identify with Christ in the waters of baptism as He has taught? Who today comes to unite with this congregation as the Word of God teaches? As we issue this invitation, come on the first note of the first stanza of our hymn of appeal. Come, and angels attend you in the way. Amen.