

JOHN 8:31-41
BAPTIST FOUNDATIONS
BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

“Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ They answered him, ‘We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, “You will become free”?’”

“Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.’”

“They answered him, ‘Abraham is our father.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did.’ They said to him, ‘We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.’”¹

We are currently exploring the particular doctrines that should define the Faith of a Baptist congregation. What truths define Baptist theology? How do Baptists differ from other evangelicals? These questions should concern each of us. If we are identical to other Christians, bringing nothing to the table that would distinguish us from every other Christian, perhaps we have no right to continue to hold a separate identity. If we are really like all other evangelical Christians, perhaps we should close the doors of this building and lend our full support to some other evangelical church with whom we will be best able to fulfil the commission of our Master.

I am convinced that Baptist theology is biblical theology; this should certainly hold true for every Baptist congregation. Moreover, certain truths distinguish Baptists as a community of faith. Historically, we Baptists influenced evangelicals to become baptistic in practise. In recent years, a form of evangelical ecumenism has influenced Baptists to become less distinctive. It is time to seek again those ancient landmarks.

“Do not move the ancient landmark
that your fathers have set.”

[PROVERBS 22:28]

I hold these Baptist convictions as a sacred trust. The distinctive truths which mark us as a confessional people have been set as landmarks, and no conscientious Christian should ever seek to move those ancient landmarks. I was not born Baptist, nor was I raised Baptist; I gained Baptist convictions through study of the Word of God and through defence of this Faith in the arena of daily life. Whenever someone asks me what I would be if I were not a Baptist, without hesitation I state that I would be ashamed.

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.

We must be careful not to jettison the truths that have historically marked Baptists congregations simply because we no longer wish to be burdened with them. Those truths represent the labours of dedicated servants of the Lord Christ as they defined and defended this holy Faith throughout the long ages since the Saviour's Resurrection. Nor will we quickly desert these doctrinal tenets, if we but understand their significance and the consequences arising should we refuse to embrace them any longer.

In messages yet planned, I propose, by God's mercy, to examine the distinctive truths which combined, define us as Baptists. For the moment, you will do well to note these distinctive truths in the margin of your Bible. The distinctive beliefs which mark us as Baptists include the following seven truths: *the authority of Scripture; the lordship of Christ; a regenerate church membership; congregational church polity; religious liberty; soul competency; and believer's baptism*. Individually, any of these truths may be claimed by other, especially evangelical, Christians. Taken together, these truths distinguish Baptists from other believers and define us within the Christian community.

CONFLICT BETWEEN AUTHORITY AND EXPERIENCE — The words of the Master that are preserved in the Scriptures are powerful and profound. He was never superfluous in His statements to those about Him. The opening words of our text constitute one of the simplest, and yet most profound, statements defining the Faith of Christ the Lord. The Master is recorded as stating, "If you abide in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" [JOHN 8:31, 32].

It is intriguing that Jesus spoke these words to Jews "who had believed in Him." Across North America on any given Sunday, thousands of sermons will be preached to Christians, urging them to live like Christians. Thousands more sermons will be preached to those who are not Christians, urging them to become Christians. It is doubtful that many sermons are preached during that same timeframe to those who are generally convinced of the veracity of the doctrines of Christianity and who think they are Christians, but who, nevertheless, have never brought their lives under the reign of Jesus as their Master and Saviour. Tragically, I suspect that this is the situation confronting the average preacher in North America on any given Sunday.

Churches, including Baptist churches, have many people seated in them who are not born-again Christians, though they are not necessarily hostile to Christianity. They believe the doctrines; it is just that they have never committed themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and they have not been born into the Family of God. They do not deny Christ, but neither do they follow Him.² Some ministers have even identified themselves as atheists! They are able to carry out this duplicitous action by convincing themselves that pastoral service is only a job and not a calling.³ These "ministers" urge those who listen to "be good," but without hope of appropriating the power of God for righteousness.

² e.g. **Atheists and Agnostics Infiltrating Christian Churches**, October 15, 1999

(<http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=2&Reference=C>),

³ Dan Harris and Wonbo Woo, "Atheist Ministers Struggle With Leading the Faithful," ABC News, November 9, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/atheist-ministers-leading-faithful/story?id=12004359&page=1>; see, also, Daniel C. Dennett and Linda LaScola, "Preachers Who Are Not Believers," *Evolutionary Psychology*, 2010, 8(1): 122-150, <http://www.epjournal.net/filestore/EP08122150.pdf>; Rev. Angie Collins, "Falling Away from the Faith: The Rise of Atheism in America," Nov. 15, 2010, http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/5997350/falling_away_from_faith_the_rise_of_pg2.html?cat=34

A sense of the magnitude of the problem can be seen from the fact that in both Britain and the United States, well over ninety percent of the people surveyed in opinion polls claim to believe in a personal God. But very few, obviously, do anything about Him. In many cases they do not even expose themselves to Christianity.⁴ According to the Barna Research Group, forty one percent of adults who attend Christian church services in a typical week are not born-again Christians.⁵

In effect, we are witnessing a conflict between authority and experience within modern church life. Jesus presented a statement of truth, and the Jews surrounding Him were unable to understand what He was talking about because of their bias. They were so focused on their religious experiences that they failed to note the authority presented. Something like happens repeatedly throughout the Christian world in this day.

The message of Christ is simple; it does not aim to impress the elite of society. Rather, it is presented so that the simplest hearer may understand that God loves His fallen creation. This is not to say that the Christian message is simplistic—it is not. The message of Christ the Lord is profound, originating in the heart of the transcendent God. Those hearing the message of life are called to faith in the Son of God. Faith in Christ precedes all else. Scripture states, “Without faith it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that he rewards those who seek Him” [HEBREWS 11:6].

Having believed, we Baptists appeal to biblical authority to justify every belief. Ultimately, what an individual practises (to say nothing of what a congregation permits) is determined by how one arrives at the knowledge of God’s will. For inquiring minds, this particular search is referred to as epistemology. Epistemology seeks to explore the basis of religious knowledge. In the coming weeks, the epistemology I shall employ will search out Baptist distinctives.

In recent years, a new basis for faith and practise has arisen among evangelicals. Actually, it is not new, but it is novel in the recent practise of evangelical Christians. Increasingly, evangelical Christians, and many Baptists, appeal to experience as authority for faith and practise. Virtually any practise can be justified by an appeal to one’s own subjective experience. In doing this, these experiential Christians deny the authority of the Word of God and jeopardise their own evangelistic and missionary vigour. The graver danger is that by exalting religious experience over biblical authority they will eventually be willing to authenticate even the lack of belief for nominal Christian

Among these evangelical churches appealing to experience are a growing number who profess to be Baptists; but in reality whenever a congregation exalts experience over Scripture for justification of a given action, they have ceased to be Baptist, much less Christian. Historically, Baptists were known as a people of the Book, appealing to the Word for authority for faith and practise. Tradition counted for nothing if the teachings of the Word were violated. Thus, Baptists were a doctrinal people—holding to a definite doctrinal position. As doctrinal people, it is the Word of God to which we must look for direction. Unfortunately, our position as a doctrinal people may be threatened through the growing tension between biblical authority and Christian experience.

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, **The Gospel of John: Volume 2, Christ and Judaism, John 5-8** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1985, 1999) 637-8

⁵ **The Year’s Most Intriguing Findings, From Barna Research Studies**, December 17, 2001 (<http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=103&Referenceo=F>)

Appealing to their experiences as the foundation for faith and practise, many have cloaked their new-found religion in religious language—God talk; they say that the basis for faith and practise is the Bible as interpreted by Jesus. This sounds quite orthodox, but in practise, these advocates of modernity mean to empty the Word of God of its authority. Whenever someone appeals to Scripture, they say, “Yes, you feel that way about what is taught in the Bible, but I feel this way.” Therefore, they have made their experience the final arbiter of faith and practise. Worse yet, some of these purported Baptists distort Baptist distinctives to justify their rejection of biblical authority.

The truths that mark Baptists as distinctive were received in one of several ways. Many of them have been forged in the fires of controversy. Non-Baptists frequently forced Baptists to define themselves and to defend their unique beliefs. In early colonial America, Baptists struggled to practise their faith according to their convictions against the governing authorities and against other Christian denominations. The Baptist beliefs in religious liberty and soul competency were in conflict with the concept of a state church brought by Puritans, Anglicans, Presbyterians and Catholics to the New World. Out of conviction, Baptists often refused to pay taxes that were levied to support the state churches. They refused to have their infants baptised by the state-sponsored churches. Consequently, Baptists were persecuted economically, socially and politically. They were beaten and jailed for their convictions. Because of these hardships, they struggled to define their faith and to defend it against the assaults of the authorities.

Not only have Baptists found it necessary to defend their faith against assault from without, but also they have often argued with one another on the question of what makes a Baptist a Baptist. Wherever there are two Baptists, there will be three opinions. Through such internal challenges, Baptists have refined their answers until most would agree with the distinctives presented. Though there may be some dissent on the fringes of the Baptist Faith, in general these distinctive truths have been adopted as accurate.

Today, if you ask why these distinctives prevail, too often you will hear an appeal to Baptist precedence.⁶ This is the practise of using statements such as, “Baptists have always believed this,” or “this [particular doctrine] has always been a part of Baptist identity.” These appeals are often cited as the undisputed truth that definitively answers the question and brings immediate resolution to the debate. However, these appeals are based more on emotion than on an accurate understanding of the issues. The end result is more confusion or less clarity on the nature of the distinctive identity of Baptists.

The strength of a given argument is dependent in no small measure upon the foundation for the belief. Whether defending our faith and practise against outside attack or whether defining the manner in which our distinctives dictate how we should live, we must have a standard by which to gauge the accuracy and veracity of those same distinctive truths. Ultimately, each distinctive truth must rest upon either an appeal to biblical authority or an appeal to Christian experience.

Biblical authority means there is Scriptural teaching providing direction for the particular activity or belief under consideration. Biblical authority is the notion that the Bible in some way serves as the authoritative basis for the theology of the belief under scrutiny. Thus, Baptist distinctives must have a biblical basis if biblical authority is the means by which we arrived at those distinctives. Christian experience, on the other hand, is the idea that an individual religious experience of God is the foundation for doctrine.

⁶ R. Stanton Norman, **More than Just a Name** (Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN 2001) 4

If biblical authority dictates faith, how I feel about an issue or my particular experience has no relevance. This is the great danger threatening our churches today. The early church devoted itself first to “the apostles’ teaching” [see ACTS 2:42]. The foundation for the experience of the early Christians—individually and corporately—was the preaching of the apostles. When they heard the message offering life in Christ the Lord, they believed. Their faith was founded on the truth that Jesus Christ is God. Having believed in Him, they sought to discover His will through listening to the teaching the apostles delivered concerning that divine will.

In the text, Jesus addressed the Jews who believed Him to be God’s authority. They had heard Him teach of that authority repeatedly. John provides us with one extended account of Jesus’ teaching. “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son, that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement.

“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgement is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” [JOHN 5:19-30].

On another occasion, after He had fed five thousand people, the following exchange between Jesus and Jewish seekers took place. “I assure you: You are looking for Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Don’t work for the food that perishes but for the food that lasts for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you, because on him God the Father has set his seal of approval.

“‘What can we do to perform the works of God?’ they asked.

“Jesus replied, ‘This is the work of God: that you believe in the One He has sent’” [JOHN 6:26-29].⁷

On yet another occasion during the Feast of Booths, Jesus once again exchanged views with Jews who believed Him. “About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching. The Jews therefore marvelled, saying, ‘How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?’ So Jesus answered them, ‘My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory, but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood’” [JOHN 7:14-18].

⁷ Holman Christian Standard Bible © 2000 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission.

Jesus claimed to be the light of the world [JOHN 8:12]. He distinguished Himself from mankind: “You are from below... I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. Therefore I told you that you will die in your sins. For if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” [JOHN 8:23, 24].⁸ He predicted His death, adding that “He who sent Me is with Me. He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him” [JOHN 8:28, 29].

His teaching led many of those who heard Him to believe Him [see JOHN 8:30]. Yet, Jesus considered many among them (if not all of them) to be *slaves to sin* [v. 34], *indifferent to His Word* [v. 37], *children of the devil* [v. 44], *liars* [v. 55], and *guilty of mob tactics*, including attempting to murder the very One in whom they professed faith [v. 59]. There was clearly a difference in what was meant by believing.

I haven’t time to thoroughly discuss the differing views presented by commentators attempting to grapple with this teaching. Therefore, I will move to quickly resolve the issue. John has previously introduced the subject of shallow faith. JOHN 2:23 states, “Many trusted in His Name when they saw the signs He was doing.”⁹ That their faith was untrustworthy is evident from the following two verses. “Jesus, however, would not entrust Himself to them, since He knew them all and because He did not need anyone to testify about man; for He Himself knew what was in man” [JOHN 2:24, 25].¹⁰

A genuine believer remains true to Jesus because He has accepted the authority of His words. A spurious believer rejects that same faith under duress because the faith is an experience and not based on His Word—His teaching. What we witness in this passage is the dynamic tension between biblical authority and religious experience.

Permit me to demonstrate the difference between biblical authority and experience as each relates to one particular historic Baptist doctrine. Focus with me on the doctrine of believers’ baptism. To approach this truth as doctrine means that we find the teaching presented in Scripture and embrace what is taught.

ACTS 2:41 states, “Those who accepted [Peter’s] message were baptised, and that day about three thousand people were added to [the Faith].”¹¹

ACTS 8:12 makes it clear that only those who believed are to be baptised. “When they believed Philip, as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptised.”¹²

The model throughout the Scriptures is faith and then baptism. This pattern is explicitly presented as the expected norm in ROMANS 6:1-10. Thus, the doctrinal position is that authority rests in what God has given in the Scriptures, regardless of our experience.

Approaching the doctrine from the experiential position, one proponent states that believer’s baptism finds its spiritual authority in one’s conscious acceptance of Christ’s authority, a personal submission to that authority, and the individual’s commitment to that authority.¹³ This argument depends upon accepting that authority is something that occurs within the context of individual experience. The author makes no mention of authority existing apart or independent of a person and their religious experience.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ H. Wheeler Robinson, *Baptist Principles*, 4th ed. (London, Kingsgate Press, 1966) 23

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE — Undoubtedly, the Jews exchanging views with Jesus did believe *about* Him. The text brings us face-to-face with the concept that there are shades of belief, however. They had a faith based upon their experience. Wherever Jesus was, there was a religious experience. People witnessed His power; they heard His bold words. All these elements combined to create faith of sorts. However, the faith in view is not necessarily that which is committed to abiding or remaining in Christ's Word.

The call of the Bible is a call to faith *in* Christ. The faith in view leads the believer to remain in Him. "The believer who is committed to abide in Jesus and in His Word is in this text designated as an authentic [*alēthēs*] disciple."¹⁴ The distinction lies in believing Christ and in committing ourselves to Him. It is possible to believe Him—believe His words and believe all that He says is true—and yet fail to commit our very beings to Him. It is as though some take what He offers, without thinking that He calls for full submission to His rule over our lives. That rule is exercised through His Word.

In the verse that precedes our text, we read that "many believed in Him" (*episteusan eīs auton*) [JOHN 8:30]. In the first verse of the text before us we see Jesus addressing those "who had believed Him" (*pepisteukōtas autō*) [JOHN 8:31 NET]. As reflected by many translations (e.g., HCSB, NIV, NASB, NET and the NEB), John distinguished between those listeners who had believed on Jesus resulting in salvation and those who had merely believed certain things He had said. Again, there is a contrast between submitting to His authority and the religious experience some listeners had.

In effect, John is deliberately using this particular literary device to confront those who would read his Gospel. It is possible to mistake experience for submission and thus confuse the means by which we arrive at truth. Judas Iscariot obviously mistook religious experience for submission. He believed enough to be one of the Twelve. He believed enough to be chosen Treasurer of the Apostles. He believed enough to be sent out with the others when they traversed Judea two-by-two. Nevertheless, Jesus saw him as a devil [see JOHN 6:70, 71].

Another such individual with faulty faith appears to have been Simon Magus who was said to believe and who was even baptised under Philip's ministry in Samaria. When Simon saw the miracles and signs that Peter and the other apostles performed, his true character was exposed as corrupt and unchanged [see ACTS 8:9-24].

If your faith is nothing more than mere religious experience, I urge you to change now and submit to Him who speaks with all authority. An illustration may suffice to help you in this instance. In the nineteenth century, a famous acrobat, Jean Francois Gravalet, known as Blondin, performed all over the world. Born in France in 1824, Blondin became known for spectacular feats on the tightrope and high wire. Among his most spectacular feats, those which drew the most attention, were his crossing of Niagara Falls on a tightrope 1,100 feet long and 100 feet above the water. Once he pushed a wheelbarrow across. On another occasion he stopped halfway and cooked an omelette.

On one particular occasion, in an unusual demonstration of his skill, Blondin carried a man across Niagara Falls on his back. He then turned around and carried him back. Putting his rider down, the acrobat turned to the crowd and asked a man watching, "Do you believe that I could do that with you?"

¹⁴ Gerald L. Borchert, **The New American Commentary, Vol. 25A, John 1–11** (Broadman, Nashville, TN 1996) 303

“Of course,” the man said. “I’ve just seen you do it.”

“Well, hop on,” said Blondin, “and I’ll carry you across.”

Putting up his hands, the man answered, “Not on your life!”¹⁵

That is the difference between believing about and believing on. That is an excellent illustration of how experience is in tension with authority. Experience witnesses what happens, but authority embraces and submits to what is transpiring.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY — Authentic discipleship is demonstrated through commitment. Notice, however, that it is commitment to a doctrinal position that leads to discipleship. Conditioned by culture, it is likely that had I been writing the text, I no doubt would have ensured that true disciples were committed to Christ! However, take note of the wording. “If you *continue in My Word*, you really are my disciples.”¹⁶ Indeed, to continue in Christ is to continue in His Word. It is impossible to continue in Christ if one rejects His Word. Salvation is not adherence to a doctrinal position; but because we are saved, we will seek to obey that teaching which Christ gave!

This is the reason that I insist that the Word of God must be authoritative in our lives. It is the Word which must judge our experiences, rather than our experiences judging the Word. This is the reason I insist so strongly that there must be a doctrinal basis for our activities and for our teachings. This is the reason I insist that even our worship must seek a doctrinal basis. Far too many professing Christians attempt to worship, but fail to honour God because they seek the experience of worship without embracing the doctrine which ensures true worship resulting from the knowledge of the presence of the Master.

The distinctive doctrines which mark us as Baptists will lead to freedom. Freedom in Christ will not be mistaken for license; rather, that freedom will be embraced together with the responsibility which always bounds true freedom. We must never forget, however, that the manner in which we arrived at the doctrinal distinctives which characterise us as a people of God is through submission to biblical authority. Christian experiences, while undoubtedly great, can never serve as a basis for our faith and practise. In fact, religious experience will inevitably lead to slavery of the vilest sort.

On that note, the message must conclude with a call to all who are willing to enter into freedom. If you embrace Christ’s Word, you reveal that you are truly His disciple. Walking with Him, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. Freedom marks those who walk with Christ, but it is always a freedom which grows out of submission to His divine authority. If you will have that freedom, you must receive the Son of God as Master of your life.

The Word of God clearly states, “God so loved the world, that He gave His Only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” [JOHN 3:16]. That love calls each of us to faith in the Son of God. Faith in Christ is revealed through submission to Him as Master of life. The Word of God declares, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. With the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved ... ‘Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13 free translation]. Amen.

¹⁵ Boice, op. cit. 639

¹⁶ HCSV