

Who Can Baptize Another Person?

by Kyle Butt, M.Div.

When a person reads through the New Testament, he is struck by how much the 27 books have to say about water baptism. When the Jews on the Day of Pentecost asked Peter what they needed to do to be right with God, Peter told them to “repent and let every one of you be baptized...for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). After Saul of Tarsus had spent three days praying and fasting, Ananias came to him and said: “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16). Paul, in the book of Romans, explained that in the waters of baptism we come in contact with the death of Christ (Romans 6:3), and it is through that contact that we are cleansed by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 1:7). That is why Paul could write in Galatians, “for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27). The importance of baptism in God’s plan of salvation is repeatedly stressed in the New Testament. [For a thorough dealing of this topic, see Lyons and Butt, n.d.]

After realizing the importance of baptism, many honest-hearted truth seekers have asked several sincere questions. One of those questions often is: “Who can baptize another person?” In recent months, we at Apologetics Press have been asked this question on several occasions. It is obvious that it is a question that springs from a genuine desire to be right with God. The place to go for the answer, of course, is the New Testament—the very place we learned about God-ordained baptism in the first place.

When we turn to the New Testament, we learn several things about the person doing the baptizing. The primary lesson learned is that the personal characteristics of the individual doing the baptizing have no bearing on the effectiveness of the baptism. In other words, it does not matter who does the baptizing, as long as the baptism is complete immersion in water (Romans 6:4; Acts 8:38), in the proper name (Matthew 28:19; Acts 19:1-9), and for the proper reason (Acts 2:38). In the book of 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote to a group of Christians that were dividing themselves into factions based on their favorite preachers. Some were saying they were of Paul, others of Cephas, others of Apollos, and others of Christ. Paul chastised them for claiming allegiance to any person other than Christ, and he stated: “I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name.... For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1 Corinthians 1:14-17). Paul was not minimizing the importance of baptism in this text (see Lyons, 2003), he was minimizing the importance **of the person who does the baptizing**. He was not saying that baptism is not a part of God’s plan of salvation; he was saying that the person who does the baptizing does not make a difference. The effectiveness of the Corinthians’ baptism was not based on the characteristics of the person who baptized them, but was based on their **baptism** as it related to God’s overall plan of salvation.

In a similar passage in John 4:1-3, we read that “the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John.” The next verse of the text states, “though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples.” If the characteristics of the one doing the baptizing were important, then Jesus would certainly have been involved in the actual baptizing process of all his disciples due to His perfect, sinless life. Yet what we see in these verses is that the effectiveness of the baptism of those in John 4 was not lessened or diminished because the apostles did the baptizing instead of Jesus.

DOES THE ONE BAPTIZING HAVE TO BE A CHRISTIAN MAN?

Some have looked into the New Testament and concluded that every instance of baptism in the New Testament is one in which a Christian man does the baptizing. Thus, they have concluded, that in order to be properly baptized, a person must be baptized by a man who is a Christian. The principle of following biblical examples and precedents is often an important key to determining biblical authority for certain actions, when explicit commands and other information have not been given. In this case, however, there is major problem with this approach. What if a person claimed to be a Christian, but was not, and baptized people while claiming to be a Christian? Would the fact that he was not a Christian negate the validity of the baptisms that he performed? Think through that scenario. Suppose a person was baptized by this charlatan. That person then went out and baptized 100 people who each baptized 100 people, who each baptized 100, etc. If the original person who was baptized by the fraudulent “Christian” later found out that the man was not a Christian, would that negate the baptism of all those who were subsequently baptized? Certainly not.

Furthermore, how “faithful” would a person need to be in order to be eligible to baptize people? It is most likely the case that many people were baptized by Judas Iscariot in John 4:1-3 when Jesus’ disciples were doing the baptizing. Did all those who were baptized by the “son of perdition” need to be re-baptized based on the traitorous character of Judas? No. The truth of the matter is, it would be virtually, if not actually, impossible to verify the “saved” status of all those across the globe who have baptized or will baptize people. Fortunately, the

characteristics of the one doing the baptizing have no bearing on the legitimacy of the baptism. When Paul instructed the 12 men in Acts 19:1-9 to be re-baptized, he did not ask them who baptized them, or what were the characteristics of the person who baptized them. He asked them about their **baptism**, not their **baptizer**.

In addition, some have gone so far as to say that the person who baptizes another person must have some type of "official" status in the church as a "pastor" or "ordained" minister. When we look into the New Testament, however, we do not see any such stipulation. In fact, the episode of Saul of Tarsus' conversion offers some pertinent insight into this question. After Saul had seen the Lord on the Road to Damascus, he was instructed to go into the city and wait for a person named Ananias to come to him. In the texts of the narrative, there is no indication that Ananias held any type of official leadership position in the church. The text says he was "a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews" (Acts 22:16), but there is no reference that he was an elder, a deacon, and certainly not an apostle. The suggestion that only an "official" of the church can baptize falls prey to the same fallacy inherent in the idea that only a Christian man can baptize.

CAN A WOMAN BAPTIZE?

The New Testament makes a clear distinction between the roles of men and women in the Lord's Church (see Miller, 2005). [NOTE: It is important to understand that different gender roles in no way imply a different status or value, see Butt, 2011.] Based on that distinction, some have wondered if women are permitted to baptize, since the Bible teaches that men are to be the public teachers and elders in the church. In addition, it is the case that every example we have in the New Testament of a person being baptized has a male doing the baptizing. Does that mean that a woman cannot baptize, or that a baptism that might be performed by a woman would be nullified?

If we are correct that the characteristics of the baptizer do not matter (as we have shown from previous biblical passages), then we must conclude that the gender of the person would not matter either. One can easily envision a scenario in which a non-Christian couple, that might be geographically isolated from others, studies the Bible and learn the importance of contacting Jesus' blood through water baptism. Upon learning this, they immediately want to be baptized, but there is no Christian man available to perform the baptism. Could they baptize each other? Yes, they could. In fact, not too long ago, a sincere couple contacted our office with that very question. They had been members of what they called "faith only" churches all their lives. When they realized the importance of baptism, they approached several of their religious friends, none of whom were Christians. Since they could find no one to baptize them, they wrote us asking if the Bible permits such a couple to baptize each other. We explained just what has been explained in this article, that the characteristics of the baptizer do not matter, and that such reciprocal baptism would be permissible. We did, however, advise them to find a body of the Lord's church nearby and begin to assemble and work with the church. In addition, suppose that a group of women, in which no men were available, wanted to become Christians. Would it be permissible for them to baptize each other? Yes, it would.

What do we do with the idea that all the baptisms that are recorded in the New Testament were performed by men? When looking to the New Testament for approved examples, we must be sure that we do not carry the example farther than it is intended to be taken. We do not want to bind where God has not bound. For instance, the apostles met in an upper room to partake of the Lord's Supper with Jesus, and Paul in an upper room in Troas in Acts 20. Does that mean that we need to eat the Lord's Supper and preach in upper rooms? No. Those were incidental details that surrounded the relevant example of eating the Lord's Supper and preaching (see Warren, 1975). As this idea relates to baptism, the examples in the Bible show us (among other things) that (1) immersion is the "mode" of baptism, (2) a believing person is the candidate for baptism, and (3) the remission of sins to contact the blood of Christ is the reason for baptism. But the examples are not given in an attempt to dictate every aspect of baptism. For instance, there is no case in which a person was baptized in a heated baptistery in a church building. Does that mean that those who are baptized in such a way have been "unscripturally" baptized? No, it simply means that the aspects of baptism that are different from the examples in the New Testament can be shown through proper study of the New Testament to be irrelevant. Again, every person in the New Testament who is recorded to have baptized a person was a Jewish male. Does that mean that only Jewish men can perform scriptural baptisms? No, the fact that they were Jewish was incidental and irrelevant to the purpose and effectiveness of the baptisms they performed. The gender of the baptizer has nothing to do with God's recognition of a scriptural baptism.

All Things Are Lawful, But All Things are Not Helpful

In 1 Corinthians 10:23, the apostle Paul stated: "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful." Paul did not mean that things like sexual immorality were lawful for him (1 Corinthians 9:21). He meant that there were (and are) some things, like eating meat that was offered to idols, that were lawful to a Christian, but even though such things might be lawful, there may be other circumstances to consider that would be reasons not to engage in the practice. In the context, Paul says that since an idol is not really a "god," but is merely a stone or clump of metal, then any food offered to such a thing is not in some way spiritually contaminated. He concludes that if we know that an idol is nothing, then eating meat offered to a clump of wood or stone has no spiritual significance. Thus, it is "lawful" for a Christian to eat meat offered to idols. He qualifies that statement, however, by saying that

some people in Corinth did not understand that idols were not really spiritual powers. These Christians still believed that such food was contaminated. Thus, it could be the case that a Christian who knew eating meat offered to idols was lawful might cause a weaker, less knowledgeable Christian to stumble. Paul then concluded that, even though eating meat offered to idols is technically “lawful,” under certain circumstances it would not be the most “helpful” or wisest course of action.

This passage relates to our baptism discussion in the following way. In the previous sections, we discussed the fact that there is nothing inherently wrong with the scenario in which those who are not Christians baptize people. We also saw that it would be permissible under certain circumstances for a woman to baptize. But we need to ask ourselves if the practical application of these ideas would, under normal circumstances, be helpful. It seems that the best-case scenario, which would be the wisest course of action, would be that those who baptize others are Christian men. Here are a few reasons why. First, if a person was baptized by a non-Christian, he or she might not have thought through the fact that the qualities of the **baptizer** do not matter, and he or she might later question the effectiveness of the baptism and be filled with internal doubt about the situation. Second, those who are not Christians viewed the baptism might misunderstand and think that baptism is not associated with God’s plan of salvation and can be done for any reason in any way.

Third, women baptizing could lead some to have a misunderstanding about the woman’s role in the church. While it is true that nothing technically precludes the possibility of a woman performing a scriptural baptism, that could easily lead to the scenario in which those who were viewing the baptism, or who hear of it, might think that performing a baptism indicates a public leadership position in the church.

Paul, through inspiration, wrote, “I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man, but to be in silence” (1 Timothy 2:12). His statement was designed to instruct the church that positions of authority and public teaching positions in assemblies were to be filled by men (Miller, 2005). Sometimes a position of “authority” might be different in one culture than in another. For instance, in the Corinthian church, some women were engaging in acts of worship with their heads uncovered (1 Corinthians 11:1-16). This was a sign in that culture that the women were not under the authority of the men. Thus, Paul explained to them that in their culture, in order to show proper respect for the authority of male leadership in the church, those women should cover their heads (or otherwise go to the logical extreme by shaving their head, since doing so was viewed as a cultural sign of prostitution). The women should not flout the culturally understood modes of showing submission (Moore, 1998). Applying this principle to baptism, then, we would need to assess whether our culture perceives the act of baptizing a person as an action to be performed by the leadership of the church. If we conclude that baptizing is viewed as something done by those in a leadership position, as is often the case with baptisms in mixed church assemblies in the United States, then we would conclude that it should be done by Christian men. If no Christian men are present, however, a woman could perform a baptism and it would not be usurping authority over a man, since none were available.

CONCLUSION

From our study, we have looked briefly at the importance of baptism in God’s plan of salvation. We have seen that while there are certain vital aspects of baptism that must be maintained, there are other aspects of the process that are incidental and irrelevant. By analyzing several passages, we have seen that the personal qualities of the **baptizer** do not alter or affect the effectiveness of the **baptism**. The truth of this fact is understood from the biblical passages, as well as from the ridiculous nature of the situations that would occur if a person faked being a Christian and baptized others. From this conclusion, it has been established that, technically speaking, both non-Christians and women can baptize. Looking at the principle of the most “helpful” or “wise” scenario, however, leads us to conclude that under some circumstances, it is wise to have a faithful Christian man baptize a person into Christ, especially in cultures in which the person performing a baptism would be viewed as having some type of authority position.

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