

Session 6: The Church, Baptism and The Lord's Supper, The Lord's Day, Cooperation

The Church

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.

Point 1: The local Baptist church is autonomous.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary describes "Autonomy" as "the quality or state of being self-governing".

Southern Baptists believe that each individual body of believers has the right to make decisions for themselves; to establish, if they so desire, a statement of beliefs that supersedes the Baptist Faith and Message.

Churches in other denominations are organized more rigidly. The Catholic Church is an example:

Apart from the rites and foreign missions, the organization of the church is by diocese, the territory of a bishop. Important sees have archbishops, who often supervise neighboring, suffragan bishops. With certain restrictions, the pope names the bishops. Dioceses are made up of parishes, each of which has a church and a priest (the pastor). The pope controls bishops mainly by general legislation. His government, which is run by the cardinals living at Rome, is concerned with matters of wide significance, such as missions and relations with states. (www.infoplease.com)

Baptist churches are free to make decisions on their own in matters that are not critical doctrine; for example, the specific qualifications for deacons. Some churches choose to allow women to serve as deacons, while others do not.

When it comes to issues of critical doctrine, however, the national convention and state conventions will exclude churches from membership. In 1998, the Georgia Baptist Convention voted to exclude congregations that endorse homosexuality. (CNN)

Point 2: Baptism and Profession of Faith are necessary for membership in the church.

The Baptist Faith and Message describes a church as a “autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel”.

A public profession of Christ is the first act necessary for membership in a church. Jesus himself made it very clear that we must be willing to publicly state our belief in Him:

Matthew 10:32

32 “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.

33 But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

Baptism is the second step necessary for membership in a Southern Baptist Church. It is not necessary that you be baptized in a Southern Baptist Church. What is necessary is “New Testament Baptism”, which we define as the full body immersion of a believer that has made a public profession of faith in Christ.

Point 3: The church’s mission is to extend the gospel.

Matthew 28:19-20 contains what is known as the “Great Commission” of Christ:

Matthew 28:19-20

19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Baptists believe that the command given by Christ to His disciples was not only intended as a command to them, but as a command to all of His followers.

Point 4: The church operates under a democratic process.

Decisions are made in a local church based on the by-laws of that church. Some decisions are made solely by the pastor, some solely by the deacons, and others by committee. But most decisions of import are put before the church for a vote.

Point 5: Each believer is responsible and accountable to Christ.

In Jewish times, the high priest was the religious figure that performed sacrifices for the people. He was also the only one allowed into the Holy of Holies, a separate area of the temple where the Jews believed God dwelled.

Even today, in the Catholic Church, it is believed that priests in individual churches are the only ones who can hear confession of sins. Catholics must confess their sins to a confessor at least once a year.

Baptists believe that the individual believer is a priest in his own right. Individual believers need not go to anyone else for confession of their sins but God. Individual believers can fellowship with God directly—no intervention is necessary. We refer to this doctrine as the “priesthood of the believer.”

Point 6: The officers of the church, as described by Scripture, are pastors and deacons.

The office of pastor is referred to as “bishop”, “elder”, and “overseer” in the New Testament. We get our word “pastor” from the Greek meaning “shepherd”.

Titus 1:6-7 describes what we should look for in the character of a pastor:

Titus 1:6-7

6 An elder must be well thought of for his good life. He must be faithful to his wife, and his children must be believers who are not wild or rebellious.

7 An elder must live a blameless life because he is God’s minister. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered; he must not be a heavy drinker, violent, or greedy for money.

Acts 20:28 contains Paul’s words to the elders of the church at Ephesus:

Acts 20:28

Be sure that you feed and shepherd God’s flock—his church, purchased with his blood—over whom the Holy Spirit has appointed you as elders.

Paul’s use of the shepherd as a metaphor for the church elders serves as a perfect illustration of our word “pastor.”

Deacons were originally selected to handle the work that the apostles could not; Acts 6:1-3 describes the selection of the original “deacons”:

Acts 6:1-3

1 But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. Those who spoke Greek complained against those who spoke Hebrew, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

2 So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. “We apostles should spend our time preaching and teaching the word of God, not administering a food program,” they said.

3 “Now look around among yourselves, brothers, and select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will put them in charge of this business.

Deacons and pastors are the only two offices in the church that are scripturally described; however, most churches do provide for additional ministers and teachers to fulfill the work of the church.

Should women be pastors? This is a question that the convention felt obliged to address at the 2000 convention in New Orleans. In doing so, they added the following line to the Baptist Faith and Message:

“While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

Because the local church is autonomous, the change to the Baptist Faith and Message is not authoritative. Each local church can decide the issue for themselves.

I have included with this lesson a handout called “Southern Baptists and Women Pastors” that may clarify the issue.

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.

Baptists hold to two ordinances: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Ordinances are the practices or ceremonies that we believe Christ commanded us to observe. Some churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church, practice these as “sacraments”. Sacraments are performed to “produce grace in the soul of the recipient by the very performance of the sacramental act”. Baptists do not believe that the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper produce any faith or grace in the heart of the believer; rather, it is God and God alone that creates, produces, and sustains faith and grace.

Christ commanded us to observe both of these acts:

Matthew 28:19

19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,

24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."

25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Point 1: Baptism should be done as it was in the New Testament; by full body immersion.

Some denominations practice baptism by methods other than New Testament baptism. The Catholic Church, for example, believes in baptism by sprinkling and pouring. Herschel Hobbs, Baptist theologian, makes the following argument for our belief in New Testament (immersion) baptism:

"That immersion is the original form of baptism is generally agreed. *Baptizo* itself teaches that neither pouring nor sprinkling constitutes New Testament baptism. Because of the later belief in baptismal regeneration, the practice arose of pouring water all over a sick person. This was called clinical baptism. Later, water was poured only on the head. It should be noted that while the verbs for "pour" and "sprinkle" appear in the New Testament, neither is used for baptism. No usage has been found where *baptizo* means either pour or sprinkle. The practice of sprinkling for baptism gradually replaced immersion in the Catholic Church and when it divided into the Roman and Greek branches, the latter retained immersion. It was not until the thirteenth century that sprinkling became the official mode of Roman Catholic baptism."

Point 2: Baptism does not save; it is only "an outward expression of an inward change."

Here again, we split from some other branches of Christianity. Baptists believe that it is only by the grace of God and our faith in Jesus Christ that one is saved. This doctrine can be summed up in Scripture:

Ephesians 2:8-9

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—

9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

By our baptism, we follow Christ's actions. Baptism is also a symbolic representation of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

The Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) states their belief this way:

“Baptism, we believe, is one of the miraculous means of grace (together with God's written and spoken Word) through which God creates and/or strengthens the gift of faith in a person's heart (see Matt. 28:18-20; Act. 20:38; John 3:5-7; Act. 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21; Titus 3:5-6; Gal. 3:26-27; Rom. 6:1-4; Col. 2:11-12; 1 Cor. 12:13).

Biblically, Baptists do not ascribe any faith-creating or faith-strengthening power to baptism.

Point 3: Baptism should only occur in a believer that has professed faith in Christ; it is not to be done in infancy.

The Lutheran Church makes this statement about infant baptism:

Although we do not claim to understand how this happens or how it is possible, we believe (because of what the Bible says about baptism) that when an infant is baptized God creates faith in the heart of that infant. This faith cannot yet, of course, be expressed or articulated, yet it is real and present all the same (see e.g., 1 Peter 2:21; Acts 2:38-39; Titus 3:5-6; Matt. 18:6; Luke 1:15; 2 Tim. 3:15; Gal. 3:26-27; Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:11-12; 1 Cor. 12:13).

Baptists do not believe that baptism causes any change in the person; it is a symbol of Christ's atoning work and it is a display of our obedience to Christ. Only believers that have decided in their heart to follow Christ should be baptized. Infants, who are unable to make the rational, willful decision to follow Christ, should not be baptized.

Point 4: The Lord's Supper memorializes the death of Christ and is a symbol of his sacrifice.

Baptists believe that the Lord's Supper is a symbolic reenactment of the Passover meal that Jesus shared with His disciples:

Matthew 26:26-28

26 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

27 When he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you.

28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

During the observance of the Lord's Supper, we remember the sacrifice of Christ. We also remember His resurrection and the promise that He will return again.

Baptists hold that only believers should partake of the Lord's Supper. Biblically, we also believe that one's heart and mind should be prepared before the ordinance is performed. Paul makes this very clear in 1 Corinthians 11:

1 Corinthians 11:27-29

27 Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

28 A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.

29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

Other denominations share different beliefs about the observance of the Lord's Supper.

Catholics believe that it is a sacrament to observe the Lord's Supper and that it is an act of sacrifice on the part of believers. They also hold to the doctrine of transubstantiation—that the bread and wine consumed actually become the physical body and blood of Christ.

Lutherans believe that the bread and wine contain the substance of the body and blood but that there is no transformation after consumption—this doctrine is called consubstantiation.

The Lord's Day

The first day of the week is the Lord's Day. It is a Christian institution for regular observance. It commemorates the resurrection of Christ from the dead and should include exercises of worship and spiritual devotion, both public and private. Activities on the Lord's Day should be commensurate with the Christian's conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Many people think that the Sabbath and the Lord's Day are interchangeable terms—they are not. Exodus 20:8-11 defines what the Jews observe as the Sabbath. It is recognized as the last day of the week.

But the Lord's Day is generally accepted to be the first day of the week. The only reference to the Lord's Day is found in Revelation 1, when John first sees Christ:

Revelation 1:10

10 On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet...

So why do we use the first day of the week? First and foremost, because Christ rose on the first day of the week. While the Sabbath was a day of rest and recognition of God's creative work, the Lord's Day is a day of celebrating the resurrection of Christ.

Also, several references in the New Testament point to the first day of the week as the day of worship for God's people:

Acts 20:7

7 On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.

1 Corinthians 16:2

2 On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

Point 1: Each Lord's Day (Sunday) is a remembrance of the resurrection of Christ.

Christ rose on the first day of the week; He appeared to His followers twice again on succeeding first days of the week.

Point 2: Our conscience and the Holy Spirit should guide our activities on the Lord's Day.

Orthodox Jews do not engage in any work on their Sabbath day. They do not even drive cars. During Christ's time the Jews had devised more than fifteen hundred regulations on observance of the Sabbath.

Christ's attitude toward the Jewish regulations is important; Herschel Hobbs points out the fact that while Christ disregarded the Jewish authorities' rules, He never broke God's commandment.

Point 3: Regardless of what else we do on the Lord's Day, it should include the exercise of public and private worship and devotion.

Jesus' followers in the early used the first day of the week to meet, as was illustrated in the Scripture above. The writer of Hebrews made reference to the importance of corporal worship in chapter 10, verse 25:

Hebrews 10:25

25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Though some people abandon worship in groups, it is a command of Christ that we gather to praise and worship Him. Baptists choose to do that through regular meetings; we also hold firm that the local church is of great import in the life of the Christian.

Cooperation

Christ's people should, as occasion requires, organize such associations and conventions as may best secure cooperation for the great objects of the Kingdom of God. Such organizations have no authority over one another or over the churches. They are voluntary and advisory bodies designed to elicit, combine, and direct the energies of our people in the most effective manner. Members of New Testament churches should cooperate with one another in carrying forward the missionary, educational, and benevolent ministries for the extension of Christ's Kingdom. Christian unity in the New Testament sense is spiritual harmony and voluntary cooperation for common ends by various groups of Christ's people. Cooperation is desirable between the various Christian denominations, when the end to be attained is itself justified, and when such cooperation involves no violation of conscience or compromise of loyalty to Christ and His Word as revealed in the New Testament.

We have long been a people that were cautious about authority. The predecessor of the Southern Baptist Convention—the Baptist General Convention—was disbanded in the early 1800's after churches became suspicious that a central Baptist authority was beginning to form.

Point 1: Individual churches may organize under state and local associations.

Though they are under no command to do so, the local church may organize with other local churches to form an “association.” Many such local associations exist and are very useful for pooling resources, mission efforts, and monies.

Churches who organize do not lose their autonomy. They still retain the power to make decisions and statements of faith.

There are over 1,200 local associations in the United States and there are 42 state conventions.

Point 2: Individual churches may organize under the national convention.

There is one national convention for Southern Baptists: the Southern Baptist Convention. Membership by a church in the national convention is achieved by contributions to the Cooperative Program. As the SBC website describes:

A church technically becomes Southern Baptist by contributing to the mission causes of the Convention. If that contribution is made within the fiscal year (October-September) preceding a particular annual meeting (June), then the church is entitled to send as many as ten messengers to the Convention.

The Convention is, technically speaking, a conference held for a few days each year. We say we belong to the “Southern Baptist Convention” because we participate in the activities that are agreed upon by those who call themselves “Southern Baptists.”

Point 3: We may organize with other denominations to spread the gospel as long as the result is justified and the means do not violate the word of God.

The Southern Baptist Convention website makes this statement regarding interdenominational unity:

Southern Baptists are wary of interdenominational councils. While Southern Baptists work with other churches on matters such as abortion and pornography, read and hear non-Southern Baptists, and join with other Baptists in the work of the Baptist World Alliance, they do not enter into covenants with others who wish to speak for them.

Words You Need to Know

autonomy	The right and power of a Southern Baptist church to make its own decisions regarding its affiliations and government.
consubstantiation	The belief of some denominations (e.g., Lutheran) that the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper are infused with the body and blood of Christ.
denomination	A group of people who organize based on common beliefs.
New Testament baptism	The practice of fully immersing in water one who has professed to faith in Christ. There is no saving grace in the baptism itself; it is in obedience to Christ that we perform it.
ordinance	A command or decree of Christ; we use it to describe the two acts we perform in Baptist churches—baptism and the Lord’s Supper.
sacrament	The practices of a church that create or strengthen grace and faith in a believer. Churches that observe the sacraments often observe seven of them: baptism, penance (confession), Eucharist (communion), marriage, confirmation, holy orders, and anointing of the sick. Baptists do not have sacraments, we have ordinances.
transubstantiation	The belief that the bread and wine used in the Lord’s Supper become the actual body and blood of Christ after consumption.

Bibliography

Hobbs, Herschel H. The Baptist Faith and Message, Convention Press, 1971.