

BAPTISTS AND THE BIBLE

By Robert Sargent

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

Intrinsic to any and every belief system is the matter of authority. Whether it applies to something as simple as a game of scrabble, or to something far weightier, such as the governance of society or the disciplines of science — an authority is essential. With scrabble, the dictionary is the final authority. A player does not have the liberty to invent words (especially if he hopes to remain friends with his opponent)! In our society, the Constitution of the United States of America is the governing authority. Every law, statute, or regulation is supposed to comply with its principles. Science, too, is governed by established laws (not by hypotheses or theories). A fool may act like King Canute and command the tides to stop, but he will soon learn that the laws of gravity are inexorable.

Without an authority, only anarchy can result. We see this illustrated during the days of the Judges of Israel. *Judges 21:25* — *“In those days there was no king [authority] in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”*

Whether it is in society, science, or even sport — actions are to be subject to a final authority. A belief or a rule has to be based upon something.

In matters of *religious* belief, authority is (and always has been) the central issue. The number one reason for the multiplicity of religious groups within the pale of Christianity boils down to the question of authority! Likewise, the number one reason for personal problems in the lives and homes of professing Christians is all over the matter of authority!

This should come as no surprise. The issue of authority stems from the very throne-room of God! Some time in the pre-Adamic past, Lucifer challenged the authority of Almighty God (Isaiah 14:12-14). Satan’s first words spoken to a human being were ones questioning God’s authority (Genesis 3:1). Israel’s response to Jesus Christ was a rejection of His authority, as foretold in the parable. They said: *“We will not have this man to reign over us”* (Luke 19:14) and, *“We have no king but Cæsar”* (John 19:15).

The starting point and distinguishing mark of Bible-believing Baptists is our authority! We believe in and accept the ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY of the Word of God.

COMPETING AUTHORITIES

In the history and practice of Christianity the authority of the Word of God has often been subjugated to other authorities. While “lip service” may be paid to the Bible, God’s Word is often relegated to a secondary (and often insignificant) place. For example, the authority of the scriptures has been supplanted by:

The Authority of “The CHURCH:”

Examples of this kind of ecclesiastical authority are best seen in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox religions. In these systems, authority is bound up in such things as the PATRISTIC WRITINGS (writings of the “Church Fathers — for example, the works of the “Father of Corrupt Theology” St. Augustine of Hippo, 354-430 A.D.), the CHURCH COUNCILS (for example the ecumenical councils held at Nicæa, Constantinople, Chalcedon, and Ephesus between 325 A.D. and 868 A.D.; the Lateran Councils held in Rome, where the blasphemous doctrine of transubstantiation was made official Catholic dogma in 1215 A.D.; the Council of Trent, 1545-1547 A.D., which inserted many of the apocryphal writings into the Biblical canon; or the Vatican Councils in 1868-70 and 1962-65), or the authority of the POPE when speaking “ex Cathedra” (from the Chair of St. Peter). The dogma of the Immaculate Conception (of Mary) was so decreed by Pope Pius IX in 1854.

The Authority of the CREED:

Most of the mainline Protestant denominations have their historic creeds. For example, the Lutherans have their Augsburg Confession, the Presbyterians subscribe to the Westminster Confession, and the Anglicans follow the “Thirty-Nine Articles.” Many Baptist churches will have “Articles of Faith,” but the difference between a creed and articles of faith is that the latter are not authoritative but explanatory — they simply state what Baptists believe the Bible teaches. Creeds, on the other hand, though they contain some Biblical truth, are more binding. Acceptance of the creed is often required for membership — rather than acceptance of Christ and obedience to His Word. Creeds, rather than the Word of God, become the measure of orthodoxy.

The Authority of the CULTS:

The authority of the pseudo-Christian cults is almost always based upon extra-Biblical writings. The Jehovah’s Witnesses are slaves to their various Watchtower publications; the LDS have the Book of Mormon and Doctrines & Covenants; the Seventh Day Adventists accept the writings of their prophetess (Ellen G. White) as authoritative; while Christian Science has its Science & Health, the Key to the Scriptures. The Bible is never believed to be absolute truth.

CHARISMATIC Authority:

Many caught up in the modern tongues and healing movement base their beliefs and strange practices on human experiences rather than upon the Word of God. “I know that’s what the Bible says, BUT I have had this amazing experience that was so real to me” is the way it is often expressed. To know things as they ARE is better than to believe things as they seem!

CRANIAL Authority:

By this we mean the exaltation of human reason. This is without doubt the major system of belief and authority in our nation today. It takes the form of RATIONALISM (“we can only believe what is *reasonable* to us” [versus Isaiah 55:8-9] — a belief-system that denies the supernatural); RELATIVISM (“we should only believe what is culturally, socially, or morally acceptable”); or as POST-MODERNISM, which holds that we can believe nothing absolutely, that authority is ever-changing.

CONSCIENCE Authority:

How often do we hear people say, “Let your conscience be your guide;” “Do what you feel is right”? While the conscience was given to man for a witness to God’s truth (Romans 2:15), it has become unreliable because of the effects of sin (see: Jeremiah 17:9; Proverbs 23:7a; I Timothy 4:2; and Titus 1:15.)

The only way our conscience can guide us is when it is conformed, and in subjection, to the Word of God. The two navigational aids we have for life’s journey are described in I Timothy 1:19 — “*Holding FAITH [the Word of God], and a good CONSCIENCE; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck.*” Even a literal magnetic compass used for navigation will not point to true north. Depending on its location on the planet, all directions have to be compensated for because of the difference between true north and magnetic north.

The Authority of the CRITICS:

Here, we refer to the Biblical scholars — those who would pass their academic judgment on the Word of God. Naturalistic scholars have developed the disciplines of both HIGHER CRITICISM (which examines the Biblical narrative and authorship — usually attacking and tearing down the credibility of the Word of God) and LOWER CRITICISM (which examines the original texts of the Word of God). Most of this kind of criticism destroys the certainty of what God said and sets up man (the “Biblical scholar”) as judge over the holy scriptures.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BIBLE TO BAPTISTS

Baptists are characterized by what they BELIEVE and by what they DO.

While other Christian organizations may share some of our beliefs and engage in some of our practices, there are certain beliefs and practices that make Bible-believing Baptists notably distinct.

First and foremost, Baptists are a people of the Book. We are “Bible-based” in all that we believe and do. In this regard, there are four great principles found in the Word of God that have been cherished and held to by Baptists since the days of Christ and the apostles to the present.

The First Great Historic Baptist Principle:

Baptists believe in the ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY of the Word of God.

We believe the Bible is supernaturally given (II Timothy 3:15-17; II Peter 1:21; I Thessalonians 2:13), providentially preserved (Psalm 12:6-7; Psalm 119:89,160), and powerfully effective (Hebrews 4:12).

Baptists ascribe no such authority to the traditions, canons, creeds, historical writings, scholarship, or experiences of Christendom.

The Second Great Historic Baptist Principle:

Baptists believe in the DISTINCTIVE DISPENSATION of the NEW TESTAMENT.

We believe the New Testament comprises the words of the apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ, and as such is the authoritative rule for the faith and order of the Lord's churches — Ephesians 3:5; II Peter 3:2; Jude 17; Ephesians 2:20.

We fully accept the Old Testament as the Word of God, but do not resort or appeal to its precepts, principles, or practices as a rule or model for a Baptist church.

The Third Great Historic Baptist Principle:

Baptists believe in individual SOUL LIBERTY.

We believe every man is *competent* to exercise private judgment when he reads the Word of God — Psalm 119:130; I John 2:27.

We believe every man has the right to freely form, hold, and express OPINIONS based on the Word of God or otherwise — John 5:39; Romans 14:5; Acts 4:18-20; Joshua 24:15; I Corinthians 4:2d; Titus 1:9b.

We believe every man is personally *responsible* to obey the Word of God and is personally *accountable* to God for his actions — Acts 17:11; Romans 14:12; John 12:48.

We believe in the *separation* of "church" and "state," though not in the way it is thought of today. We understand that both institutions are ordained of God, but for totally different rôles and purposes. Civil government can and must mandate and regulate a person's *behavior* but it cannot mandate or regulate a person's heart or *conscience* — Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:11; Acts 5:29; Romans 13:1-7; I Peter 2:12-14.

The Fourth Great Historic Baptist Principle:

Baptists believe in the PRIESTHOOD of every BELIEVER.

We believe every true believer is a priest of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We believe no man, organization God with full and equal access to God through the merits of the Great High Priest, ritual, or creed can rightfully stand between the soul and God — I Peter 2:5,9-10; Revelation 5:9-10; I Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:14-16; 10:19-25; Matthew 6:6; II Corinthians 1:24.

The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 119:45 — "*And I will walk at LIBERTY: for I seek THY precepts.*" Intelligent and willing submission to the authority of the Word of God will never lead to bondage. It produces great liberty. Little wonder that Baptists and their like have been champions of true freedom throughout the ages. The truth will always make you FREE.