

Is Anyone Permitted to Baptize?

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Who can baptize? Should only pastors/elders/evangelists/missionaries baptize people? The Bible does not specifically address this question. Those churches that have a hierarchical structure and have a special priesthood will insist that only their ordained clergy should perform the rite of baptism. In other evangelical churches, due to their leadership roles and responsibilities, the baptism of believers is normally done by the pastors or elders.

But the Scripture simply does not specify who can perform the ordinance of baptism. The epistles never discuss who is to baptize. What is discussed is the meaning and significance of baptism. The New Testament gives us freedom in administering the ordinances. All the details of the “how to” of the meeting of the church is not spelled out in the Bible. The Word of gives us patterns and principles in several areas related to the life and ministry of the church. Where precepts are not clearly given, we must follow the overall principles and pattern. Within these boundaries, we must operate with a sense of responsibility and accountability.

Who is allowed to baptize another person? Is anyone permitted to perform baptisms? As stated earlier, the Bible does not provide details regarding who can perform a baptism. Baptism need not be limited to the leadership of the church. There is nothing in the New Testament that forbids other believers from performing this act of identification with the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. All believers are priests to God. There is no priestly class in the New Testament church that limits ministry to a certain few. Then there seems to be no need in principle to restrict the right to perform baptism only to a special group of officers or leaders.

Biblical Examples & Guidelines

While the Bible does not offer specific rules regarding who can administer baptism, there are some guidelines that can be helpful. We apply several such biblical and practical guidelines to many situations in the service, gatherings, and the meeting of the church, when specific commands or rules are not spelled out. The same principle applies to baptism also.

1. We can see several instances in which apostles and church leaders baptized people. On several occasions, church leaders baptized people in the New Testament. Peter and the apostles baptized large numbers in Acts 2. Philip preached the Gospel in Samaria and baptized believers there (Acts 8:4-12). Philip was one of the seven selected to serve tables (Acts 6:1-6). It is doubtful whether the seven were deacons in the later sense of officers in the church. Philip is later called “the evangelist” (Acts 21:8). He baptized the Ethiopian after leading him to the Lord (Acts 8:26-39). Paul baptized some of those who trusted in Christ in the course of his missionary work (Acts 16:33). Paul and the missionary team performed baptisms during their missionary activities (Acts 19:1-7). Paul also let others do the baptizing instead of him (1 Cor.1:10-17). Many different people were involved in

the baptisms in the New Testament, and it was not restricted to leaders or those who had office in the church.

2. The Great Commission passage (Matt.28:19-20) records Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations and includes baptizing as part of the process of disciple making. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations baptizing them.....teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." Since we believe that the Great Commission was given to all Christians, then it follows that all Christian disciples are authorized to baptize as they fulfill the requirement of the discipling process. In the broad context of the Great Commission, it may be argued that any Christian who leads another person to faith in Christ could potentially baptize someone. This is a general principle only by implication. It will be too much to build a case for "every Christian can baptize" from the Great Commission passage. If every aspect of the Great Commission is applied to individual believers today, then I wonder whether 99% of us are disobeying the Great Commission.

Practical Considerations

The practical considerations outlined here are not to be considered merely as human opinion or preferences. I believe these suggestions have biblical and theological basis which should not be ignored. We do many other things in the church regularly considering several practical implications. It is important in the matter of baptism also.

Baptism is a public confession in obedience to Christ. Hence, the baptism ceremony also is a public event usually attended by believers and unbelievers alike. It is a golden opportunity for the proclamation of the Gospel and to witness to the truths upheld by a local church. It is a vivid portrayal of the enactment of faith before all those who are watching (I have observed children attending the service usually very attentive and curious about what is happening).

Baptism is an ordinance committed to the church to carry out with all reverence. Hence, it demands responsible church oversight and supervision. The elders are responsible to make sure that baptisms are carried out in a manner that honors God and His Word. It is through the under-shepherds (elders), that Christ, the Chief Shepherd of the Church, governs the church. In view of the role of the oversight of the assembly, the elders should take more responsibility in selecting the baptizer, if they themselves are not doing it. The father may want to baptize his children, or the brother in Christ who might have led a person to Christ may want to baptize him/her, or even some other believer may want to do the baptism. It is not something to be thrown open to all because we do not have a clergy-laity distinction. It is the responsibility of the elders to make sure that the person conducting the baptism is a godly person, maintaining a good testimony, known to the assembly well, responsibly involved in the assembly, and spiritually mature to do such weighty public ministries. The elders must evaluate the person and with careful discernment decide whether he can do it in an honorable way. Necessary

instruction, exhortation and guidelines should be clearly communicated to the one going to baptize so that everything may be done decently and in order (1 Cori.14:40).

The elders represent the congregation, and they should present good and covetable models of ministry for the sake of all believers, especially for the young generation growing in their midst. As leaders they should set the pace and direction of how to honorably execute leadership responsibilities in relation to the significant ministries of the church, especially in matters related to the ordinances (these guidelines are also applicable to the question of who should administer the Lord's Supper).

I believe in a baptism service there must be full involvement of the oversight in a significant way. Though other believers may be encouraged to perform baptism when it is appropriate (provided they are able to do it in dignity and in honor), the elders should take more initiative in such responsibilities and should not simply invite any and every one with a casual attitude to do such ministries. It is not a private ceremony of an individual or a family. It is the ordinance of the church. Even when others do it, the elders must superintend the process from beginning until the end. There must be a process of accountability. After all, it is not simply an occasion when somebody takes a dip in the water!

Taking into consideration the meaning and significance of baptism, the way it is administered is also important. We must uphold its solemnity, sanctity, and dignity. A careless and irresponsible appeal to the priesthood of believers does not support the administration of baptism by anyone and everyone. This is a danger that has crept into many assemblies – “one man” ministry is replaced by “any man” ministry. Unknowingly, we do great damage by promoting the false idea that everyone can get involved in everything without instruction, guidance, and supervision. Yea, “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

The issue (sometimes a controversial one) of the administration of baptism (who should baptize?) finds very little biblical basis. We must include requirements and guidelines beyond what the Bible teaches as part of our effort to conduct baptisms (this applies to the Lord's Supper also) in an honorable manner. This is urgent due to the spiritual truth portrayed in baptism. The church is responsible to make sure that baptisms are carried out in a manner that honor God and bless His people. Due to the spiritual truth portrayed in baptism, it certainly should be carried out only after being carefully evaluated and instructed by the elders and under their oversight. A casual attitude of “free for all” in this matter should be avoided at all costs.

What I have suggested here is not a strange ideology. We add so many requirements and practical guidelines for discipline and decorum in all our meetings and activities. Why not in our baptism service too? He who has an ear, let him hear.