

It Is Written

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Do We Have A Baptismal Formula?

By Jerry Fite

Before Jesus ascended to His throne on high, He instructed His apostles to “Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 28:19 ASV). When the apostle Peter carried out this command when Jesus was sitting on his throne ruling from Heaven, we read Peter instructed believers of the Gospel message to “repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38 ASV).

Some members of the church of Christ believe Jesus gave us a “baptismal formula” that must be said over everyone who is baptized. If so, which is it? “I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit;” or, “I baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ.”?

Those comprising the “Oneness Pentecostals” offer their solution. The One God has made Himself known to man for salvation as Jesus, the Son of God. In their thinking, there are no three distinct persons in the Godhead, but there is only One God who makes Himself known as the Son of God and the Holy Spirit. When the apostles carried out the great commission, and they instructed hearers to be baptized in the name of Jesus, this was fulfilling the command of Matthew 28:19. Therefore, those baptizing must say “I baptize you in the name of Jesus,” for only in Jesus’ name is how the one God wants Himself known by name in baptism.

The first observation of the passages connecting the name of God with baptism is that they are not pointing to what is to be “said,” but what was to be “done.”

Observing the action of the one baptism, we also notice the different prepositions connected with “the name.” In Matthew 28:19, disciples being baptized were to be baptized (*eis*) or pointing toward the name or authority of the united Godhead in one’s baptism. It is “the name” (singular) not “names” because the Divine persons comprising the Godhead are united in saving man from sin through Christ.

God—the Father planned how man was to be saved; God—the Son executed that plan in His death and resurrection; and God—the Holy Spirit revealed that plan through the Gospel (cf. Ephesians 1:3-6; 7-9; 8-14; 3:5-7).

In Acts 2:38, the preposition “in” the name of Jesus Christ is (*epi*), which denotes “upon the ground of” or upon the name or authority of Jesus Christ. Peter had preached the death and resurrection of Jesus, establishing Him as the Messiah prophesied to come with the authority to save man from sin. It is upon the foundation of Jesus’ death and resurrection that He possesses the only name by which we can be saved (cf. Philippians 2:8-9, Acts 4:8-12). People who received the word were baptized upon the knowledge of the foundation of Jesus having the name or authority to save.

In Acts 10:48, Cornelius and his household were commanded to be baptized “in (*en*) the name of the Lord,” or by His authority which He possessed to save both Jew and Gentile from sin.

We can say “what we are doing” when we baptize people for the remission of their sins: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit;” “I baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ;” “I baptize you in the name of the Lord” all express what is being done. They all express the authority of God in baptism, but not a single formula to be spoken making a baptism valid!

Church Autonomy

By Robert Turner

"Autonomy" is a compound word, composed of autos, meaning "self," and nomos, meaning "law." An ordinary dictionary will tell us the word means "self-ruled," so that an autonomous church is "self-governed, without outside control."

There are those who reject the concept of God and revelation, saying ultimate authority is in man. To them, there would be no limitations placed upon self-rule. Of course, most of our readers accept Christ as King and know that a church that wishes to exercise "self-rule" in all things is not the church of Christ. But our brethren are far from clear on the legitimate (scriptural) field of self-rule, and how this affects the relation of one church to another. Some seem to think "autonomy" means the right to devise organizational arrangements for which there is no New Testament authority; while others think calling attention to such error violates the "autonomy" of the erring brethren.

A church cannot "rule" on the importance of Christ's death, the necessity of faith, the meaning and purpose of baptism; for these are legacies of truth which Christ gave the world and by which we are called. The church is the product of the gospel, not its author. One would not violate some church's autonomy by teaching along these lines, for no church is a legitimate "say" in such things.

Does God give a local church the right to decide the day of worship? May they "rule" on the need for assembling, or the so-called "items" of acceptable worship? It is not clear that even in those things assigned as church (team) activity, a distinction must be made in that which is part of "the faith, once for all delivered unto the saints" (over which the congregation has no rule), and such details as are left to human judgment. The field of church autonomy is that of human judgment, and that only.

As an example: God's word indicates the day on which saints are to partake of the Lord's Supper -- but it does not specify the time of day. The time is left to human judgment, and therefore to the "rule" of brethren. A church exercises autonomy when it sets its own time of assembling -- and we might add, that time rests upon human authority, not upon divine mandate. Each church has this same right and may choose different times. If one sought to unduly influence or alter another's time of meeting, this would be interfering with "autonomy."

But if one church should declare Thursday the Lord's Day, others could seek to teach them more perfectly the way of the Lord -- and violate no legitimate "autonomy" in doing so -- for no church has the scriptural right to "rule" in matters God has settled.

When brethren have honest differences in their understanding of what God has said, one church may believe their "ruling" is done in matters of judgment, while another may believe they violate the plain teachings of God. If both parties are equally interested in serving God, neither will rest the case in "our rights," but will be happy to study God's word together so that God can rule supremely in all.

Wrong Is Always Wrong

Wrong is wrong, even if you don't get caught. The eyes of the Lord are in every place.

Wrong is wrong, even if you do it for a good cause. The end never justifies the means. The honorable purpose does not justify a dishonorable deed or action.

Wrong is wrong, even if it doesn't bother the conscience. The conscience can be trained or educated to accept wrong-doing; even an honest sin or an evil done in sincerity is sinful in the sight of God. Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap."