

# **Who Can Perform the Ordinance of Baptism?**

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## Introduction

Scripture is oddly silent regarding the prescription of requirements to perform the ordinance of baptism. Silence does not entail absolute indifference to the issue, but it should cause local churches to approach it with considerable caution in mandating a particular practice. Though there are *no explicit texts mandating certain restrictions*, wisdom suggests that at least a few qualifications be placed upon those performing the ordinance. One might summarize the qualified individual this way: A believer in Jesus Christ, baptized subsequent to salvation, and in good standing with a local church.

It is my conviction that the local church is to habitually practice the sacraments of baptism (Matt. 28:19) and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-25). They are continuing practices of the church given by Christ himself (Luke. 22:17-20, 24:44-53) and may be administered by any regenerate believer (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:5). Therefore, when I am asked, "Who should perform baptisms?", I am quick to respond, "The person who has had the most significant spiritual influence on your life up to this point." I am aware that my position is challenged by many, so I wish to give a brief defense of my position regarding who may perform the act of baptism.

## What Do We See in the New Testament?

Biblically speaking, there is almost no guidance. Only a couple of times do we know who actually baptized someone. Turning to the New Testament specifically, we do, however, 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 or legitimacy of the baptism. *It does not matter who does the baptizing (male/female or ordained/laity), 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 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote to a group of Christians that were dividing themselves into factions based on their preacher of choice. Some were Team Paul, others Team Cephas, others Team Apollos, and others Team Christ. Paul reprimanded them for claiming allegiance to any person other than Jesus and said these words: "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). Notice here, Paul was

not minimizing the importance of baptism in this text. Paul 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 performs the baptism does not make a difference. The effectiveness or legitimacy of the Corinthians' baptism was not based on the characteristics of the person who baptized them. It was based on their baptism as it related to God's overall plan of salvation (see John 4:1-3 for a similar example).

Further, when Paul instructed the twelve 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*. It seems to me that the characteristics (male/female or ordained/laity) of the one doing the baptizing have no bearing on the legitimacy or effectiveness of the baptism. In what follows, I will highlight a few key issues in the debate and respond to them.

### Ordained or Not?

Historic tradition and practice have restricted the performance of the ordinance of baptism to males who have been formally ordained for ministry. However, *such a restriction is not mandated by Scripture*. In fact, the biblical precedent is the equipping of the saints so that they may perform the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12) as lay "priests" (1 Peter 2:4-10).

Still, 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. A great theologian, Kevin DeYoung of the Reformed Theological Seminary, whom I greatly respect, holds to this position<sup>1</sup>. In my opinion he has the best defense for this view, and I hold to many of the same doctrines that he does. However, he also holds to infant baptism (I do not), which, once again, is also based more in tradition than Biblical texts.

When we investigate the New Testament, however, we do not see any stipulation as to ordained ministers or elders alone having authority to perform baptisms. In fact, consider the Apostle Paul's conversion; it sheds some light on the subject. After Saul (aka Paul) had seen the Lord on the road to Damascus, he was instructed to go into the city and wait for a person named

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<sup>1</sup>Kevin DeYoung, Council Member Of The Gospel Coalition. Kevin DeYoung - <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/profile/kevin-deyoung/>

Ananias to come to him. In 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). There is no reference that he was an elder or deacon, and he certainly was not an apostle.

Additionally, noteworthy and fascinating, is that, at times, Scripture actually emphasizes that certain leaders were not the ones to personally perform baptism ceremonies. For instance, Jesus was not baptizing, but His disciples were (John 4:1-2), and Paul celebrated the fact that he was not commissioned as a “set apart” baptizer, but rather primarily to preach the Word (1 Corinthians 1:13-17).

### **Male or Female?**

Because of the historic emphasis on the role of the professional pastor/priest in performing baptism, many churches have traditionally prohibited females from performing the ordinance. At this point, I would like to state that I fully embrace the complementarian conviction of the biblical restriction of the elder/pastor role to qualified and called men (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:8-13; Tit. 1:5-9, 1 Pet. 5:1-4). However, I see nothing within Scripture that leads me to conclude that women are prohibited from the performance of baptism. My conviction is that where the Scripture grants freedom, we should be quick to express the same freedom in performance of this ordinance. Where the Scripture grants freedom in general, we should be quick to express the same. May we not be dogmatic about things which Scripture does not lead us to be.

### **What do we do With the Idea That All the Baptisms That Are Recorded in the New Testament Were Performed by Men?**

It is true that every example we have in the New Testament of a person being baptized has a male doing the baptizing. Does that necessarily mean that a woman cannot baptize, or that a baptism performed by a woman would be nullified? If I am correct that the characteristics of the baptizer do not matter (as I have shown from previous biblical passages above), then if people are to be logically consistent and seeking to base their argument in Scripture, rather than tradition or culture, they must conclude that the gender of the person would and should not matter.

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 or be dogmatic where Scripture does not require us to be. Allow me to illustrate my point. The apostles met in an upper room to partake of the Lord's Supper with Jesus (Lk. 22), and Paul in an upper room in Troas (Acts 20). Does that mean that we need to eat the Lord's Supper and preach God's Word in upper rooms exclusively? No, that would be absurd. Those were incidental, though not unimportant, details that surrounded the relevant example of eating the Lord's Supper and preaching the Word of God. Also, wine has historically been used during communion in the church. Why don't most churches today use wine if that is the example? It seems we feel freedom to substitute grape juice, or lots of tiny cups instead of drinking from the same chalice, or crackers or gluten free options etc. (many more examples could be provided here).

Let me show how the above 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 and trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation is the reason for baptism. The examples are not given to dictate every aspect of baptism, just like the Lord's Supper illustration above. The church enjoys great variety in method and form when it comes to the Lord's Supper, and there are multiple legitimate ways to partake of the meal together.

Two more brief examples will suffice. There is no case in which a person was baptized in a heated baptistery in a church building in Scripture. Does that mean that those who are baptized in such a way have been baptized contrary to Scripture? 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 and exegesis of the New Testament to be irrelevant. Secondly, every person in the New Testament who is recorded to have baptized a person was a Jewish man. 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, effectiveness, and legitimacy of the baptisms they performed. Therefore, it seems to me logical and biblical that the gender of the baptizer has nothing to do with God's recognition of a scriptural baptism. Baptism is simply celebrating the glory that God receives, when one of his children makes a public profession of faith showcasing

an internal change with this outward expression of their faith in Christ and their dedication of their lives to follow him.

**Final Considerations That Our Decision Effects:** *The Authority, Sufficiency, Clarity, and Inerrancy of Scripture, Hermeneutics, The Great Commission, Legalism, and Bowing to Culture and/or Tradition.*

I believe this section is the most important one to consider, because the implications of not affirming that baptism may be performed by any regenerate believer, touches everything stated in this section heading. As one who affirms that it should not matter who baptizes whom, with the exception that they be a regenerate believer, my main concern, though not my only one, is not about gender or ordination, but about how one approaches biblical exegesis and deduces from that exegesis, their theology. I will give two brief examples of how these things all tie together using the Great Commission and Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees for adding to the Law.

Matthew 28:18-20 says, "And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." I think it is safe to say at this point in history believers are at the "end of the earth" stage. That being said, how we carry out missionary work is diverse and ranges from speaking with our neighbor next door to visiting foreign countries. Missions is a discussion for another time though, let's talk discipleship and baptism.

I believe that in the Great Commission believers across all time are commanded to make disciples and baptize converts. In verse 19 Jesus is speaking specifically to the eleven, but notice what he says in verse 20, "***teaching them*** (that is converts) ***to observe all that I have commanded you.***" The ***them***, refers to new believers regardless of gender or church office. Jesus says in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." John in 1 John 5:3 and 2 John 6 say this, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome ... And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments..." I think one must do some sketchy exegetical maneuvers to conclude from Scripture, not tradition or cultural influence, that: (1) the Great Commission was only for the eleven (2) Only ordained ministers/elders can perform baptisms (3) it applies fully to men and

only partially to women. Are women not disciples and called to make disciples themselves, of which baptism is a part? Let me add that, I have been blessed by being a part of several churches that have a sincere heart for foreign missions work. In some cases, though, there were no men who went on these trips. Are we to say that women shouldn't baptize new converts on the mission field either, simply because they are women? Is it typical that a pastor, elder, or father baptizes most believers? Yes, but that is different than specifically prohibiting a woman from doing a command from the Lord Jesus Christ himself, found in Scripture. How do women obey if they're told they can't do it? We are one in Christ, a priesthood of believers (Gal. 3:28; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:5-6). We should not unduly shackle where God has granted freedom. This leads to my next example, the Pharisees and Jesus.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day were the ultimate "super Jews", highly religious and zealous. Yet, as Matthew 12:1-37 demonstrates, they were Jesus' most bitter opponents. It seems to me, from the gospel accounts, that the primary reason the Pharisees took offence at Jesus was because he didn't adhere to their hundreds of elaborate, but petty, rules that they had devised for interpreting the law of God. Not only did they invent this plethora of man-made rules, but they had also elevated them to the level of Scripture. The implication being that to break one of their rules was to violate the Law of God. We learn from Jesus that these rules not only obscured the true intent of God's law, but also, in some cases, actually violated it. Mark 7:9-13 vividly displays this reality,

“And he said to them, “You have a fine way *of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!*”<sup>10</sup> For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’<sup>11</sup> But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban” ’ (that is, given to God)—<sup>12</sup> then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother,<sup>13</sup> *thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.*”

What are we to learn from Jesus' clash with the Pharisees over tradition and the authority of Scripture? *We need to take caution that we do not add our own man-made rules to the Scriptures.* What I am going to say next is a difficult truth for all of us to embrace, but it needs to be said. Some convictions that we hold dearly may be derived more from our particular Christian culture or faith tradition rather than derived from Scripture itself. As faithful students of God's word, we need to learn to discern the differences. It is not wrong to have cultural

convictions. However, we should be careful that we do not elevate them to the same authority as Scripture. We must not make the biblical text say what we want it to say, imposing our ideas and thoughts onto Scripture rather than letting Scripture form our thoughts and ideas. So much judgmentalism, legalism, and hypocrisy among Christians today occurs because we do this. That is basically what the Pharisees were doing, and what we can fall prey to ourselves in the twenty-first century. Therefore, let's be careful that we are not modern-day Pharisees, being dogmatic about things Scripture is not.

## **Conclusion**

As a church, we want to be firmly committed to the sufficiency of Scripture and maintain tradition to the extent that such tradition accords with clear biblical teaching and/or wisdom. In the area of performing baptism, it seems as though the only real requirements for the baptizer are: belief in Christ, having been baptized themselves, and general Christian obedience. I see nothing within Scripture that leads me to conclude that women are prohibited from the performance of baptism, or that only ordained ministers or elders should baptize others. It is my conviction that to view this issue otherwise is to bow one's knee to tradition or cultural influence rather than to the God-breathed Scriptures. Where the Bible grants freedom, we should be quick to express the same freedom to the glory of God.