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“WHAT IS A BAPTIST?”
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In Matthew, chapter sixteen, Jesus had come to Caesarea Philippi in the northern part of Galilee. As he stood there with the high rocks and cliffs around Him, our Lord asked a question: “Who do men say that I am?” The disciples responded that some said He was Elijah, some said that He was John the Baptist, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Then Jesus asked, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter impulsively answered, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus said, “Simon Bar-Jonah, flesh and blood has not revealed this unto you, but our Father which is in Heaven.” Then he made this statement in verse eighteen: “I say to you that you are Peter (Petros) and upon this rock (petra) I will build my church.”

In 1960, John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States. People across the land began to ask, “What is a Roman Catholic, and how will a president of that faith affect these United States?” In 1968, Richard Milhouse Nixon was elected President of the United States. All across America people asked, “What in the world is a Quaker?” Then in 1972, a Southern Baptist was elected and people asked, “What is a Baptist?” When President Jimmy Carter’s daughter, Amy was taken behind a curtain to prepare to be baptized, one of the Secret Service agents who had never been in a Baptist church before wanted to know what they were going to do to her back there. He saw his life and his job on the line and wondered, “What is a Baptist anyhow?” As we look across our land today, I believe there are many who are still asking that question, “What is a Baptist?”

As we race toward the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in a religious climate that downplays the role of denominations in religious life. As the year 2000 approaches, we are educating a generation that does not know the names or contributions of John Smith, Roger Williams, Adoniram Judson, Luther Rice, Lottie Moon, or George Truett. These and thousands of other Baptists have blazed the trail for us. We must not forget them and we dare not forget the stands they have taken for the faith.

What is a Baptist? There are churches today that are removing the word *Baptist* from their church signs. That really does not bother me. As a matter of fact, in our Southern Baptist Convention last year, the leading church in evangelism that baptized more persons than any other church in the convention does not have Baptist in its name. What really bothers me is when a Baptist church leaves *Baptist* on its sign and functions as something else.

What is a Baptist? There have been Baptists throughout the years in our country and its history. Daniel Boone’s brother, Squire, was a Baptist preacher. Abraham Lincoln’s mother was a staunch Baptist. Four United States presidents, including the one who currently occupies the White House, have been Baptists. What is a Southern Baptist? What is a Florida Baptist? For my congregation, what is an Olive Baptist? That question may be answered in four simple statements as we examine the text and stand firm on the Solid Rock.

Baptists are soul competent. Jesus looked at these men and said, “Who do people say that I am? Then He asked more pointedly, “But who do you say that I am?” Then He asked more pointedly, “But who do you say that I am?” No one else could answer the question for Peter; no one could answer the question for these disciples. Who do you say, you who are competent? You answer the question. Don’t ask your mother, don’t ask the Pharisees, don’t ask the scribes. As a soul, you are competent.

Herschel Hobbs has said that soul competency is the one and only Baptist historical significance. Everything else that is significant about Baptists has been pioneered by others, but belief that every soul is competent is what has made Baptist doctrine unique.

Competency means a competency under God, not a competency of human self-sufficiency. There is no reference here to the question of sin and human ability in the moral and theological sense. This is not a creed. As a matter of fact, soul competency stands as a safeguard against coercion with respect to solidifying one's faith in the form of a written creed. This does not mean that one can believe anything he chooses and call himself a Baptist. This competency stands as a flaming sword to protect the individual conscience in matters of faith and in its relation to Holy God. We as men and women can deal directly with the Lord God. We need no human interference. We need no priest to come and pray over us. We have a High Priest, and His name is Jesus Christ. We need not the human interference of infant baptism. We do not baptize children because the baptism of an infant gives false security to that child to believe that he has been made right with God by the hands of human instrumentation. You cannot be made right with Holy God save through the blood of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are competent to stand. Oh, we are sinners, we are totally depraved, we cannot save ourselves, but if we are going to give an account--and we shall--we do it individually. We need no priest. We need no infant baptism. We need no religion by proxy, no one to be baptized for us when we are dead and gone. No one need go in my name into the baptismal pool and say, "In the name of Ted Traylor, I will be baptized on his behalf." I have been baptized by the power of God's Spirit when I was ten years old as a soul competent to stand before God. When I heard Nolan Ford give the invitation on a Thursday in Vacation Bible School and I came forward, the first of sixteen to give our hearts and lives to Jesus, I understood that no man, no human instrument stood between God and me, only Christ. There is now, therefore, one mediator between God and man, the man, Christ Jesus.

As a priesthood of believers we stand before God, responsible and without excuse. Man has the capacity for God, and we are made in His image. God can and does communicate directly to us. The world does not understand that. The world thinks that there has to be some holy man who handles the things of God, but these are the people who handle the things of God: butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers. People who walk in an everyday world are competent of soul to know God through Jesus Christ. What makes us Baptists? Baptists are soul competent.

Baptists are not only soul competent, but **Baptists are scripturally confident.** In Matthew Sixteen Jesus continued by saying that the gates of Hades would not prevail against the church. In verse nineteen He said He would give to Peter the keys to the kingdom. In his commentary on Matthew, G. Campbell Morgan wrote that the scribe was known by the symbol of a key. In Matthew 13:51-52, Jesus said that when a scribe comes to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, that scribe unlocks both new and old. Christ was thrilled when anyone was saved, but when a scribe came, He knew that the scribe knew the Word of God and the work of God. We as Baptists are scripturally confident. We hold the keys, and the world needs to know what is right and what is wrong. Our Job is not to give our opinion; our job is to give God's opinion in this world.

On one of those idiotic afternoon talk shows a mother said, "I allow my daughter to have sexual intercourse at home because I want it to be safe. When there is a green tag hanging on her bedroom doorknob I do not enter because I rather her be sexually active at home than in the back seat of a car somewhere." An audience member stood and said, "That's wrong." The mother responded, "That's your opinion. I have my opinion." We are awash in opinions today. Dear friend, the world does not need the Baptists' opinion, but God's opinion. We are here to speak for Him according to the Word of God. It is time we stood and we said without wavering, "This is God's mandate." When you find those truths, stand

firm. If they cut off your head, don't worry. You are about to get a promotion straight to Glory! Stand firm!

The day was Halloween. The year was 1916. The paper was the *Nashville Banner*. A man had died in Nashville, and the headline read: "Death summons Dr. J. M. Frost, identified with the Sunday School Board for 25 years; considered the greatest living Baptist." Who was J. M. Frost? In 1882, he was the founding president of the Sunday School Board. In 1900, he compiled a volume of essays entitled, *Baptist Why and Why Not*. The Sunday School Board has just re-released the book with Timothy and Denise George as the editors. If you have not read *Baptist Why and Why Not*, I encourage you to get a copy.

J. M. Frost, our Baptist forefather, said,

We accept the scriptures as an all-sufficient and infallible rule of faith and practice and insist upon the absolute inerrancy and sole authority of the Word of God. We recognize at this point no room for division either in conviction, practice or belief or even in sentiment. Our conviction is that "thus sayeth the Lord" is the end of all controversy. The noblest and mightiest union is the union formed in convictions and none other is even worth the naming.

He stood for the Word of God. We Baptists are scripturally confident.

A lot of Baptists say they believe the Bible, but applying it is another matter. I grew up in Jackson County in rural North Alabama. I did not know a black man on a first name basis when I graduated from high school. There was not a black man living within twenty miles of my home. There was not then; there is not now. I went to Northeast State Junior College on a basketball scholarship, and will never forget the first game we played. Coach Bill Elder called time out. I walked over to the sideline with my lungs burning and my body screaming for something cool to drink.

Have you ever had a time when God freeze-frames you and lets a millennium pass in front of your eyes? I saw it coming—the plastic water bottle being handed down from player to player. Each man would put that straw in their mouths, squeeze and suck out the water and hand it to the next guy. Freddy Whitmore stood next to me. He was six feet six inches tall and had enormous hands. Freddy handled the basketball like I handle a softball. He was from Satsuma, Kentucky, and we would call him an African-American today. I called him something else in those days. Feddy took the bottle and got himself a drink and handed it to me. I said, "Now, Lord, what are we going to do here? I've never done this before." I can remember as a lad seeing the words *white* and *colored* on a drinking fountain. That day thirst overcame my prejudice. I sucked deep and I drank long and I prayed as I handed the bottle to the next guy, "Dear God, what will drinking after a black man do to my red hair?" God drove me to His Word that day and I began to pray. I found out that though there are differences in our races and our cultures, we must understand that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male or female. We are one in Christ Jesus.

I was privileged to preach at the 1996 New York State convention. There were 350 messengers and we had a glorious time in the Lord. They had wonderful singing and I preached last. When I finished, Dr. Sam Simpson, their president and old enough to be my grandfather, came and hugged me. That African-American's coarse hair rubbed across my cheek. He held me out at arm's length and said to that convention, "I love this red-haired preacher; he is my brother." I said, "Glory to God."

Only God's grace and scriptural confidence could bring me to the place that I would now embrace him when years ago I would shun him. My culture said to do one thing; the scriptural confidence of God told me to do another. We must always reject culture and say "yes" to confidence of Holy Scripture.

We are as Baptists soul competent, scripturally confident, and thirdly, **Baptists are structurally cooperative**. “I will build my church,” Jesus said. He is going to put us together, to build us. You understand that this Baptist system should not work. It can’t work according to worldly standards. I have tried to explain it to secular newspapers all year long. They ask, “Do you speak for the church?” I say, “Friend, I can’t even speak for my wife; I don’t speak for Florida Baptists.” If you want an opinion, ask me—I always have one, but it is mine. I cannot state my opinion as yours. We are as Baptists structurally cooperative.

My wife’s father died in 1971. He was a Baptist deacon and Sunday School teacher, and my mother-in-law kept his library full of study course books, commentaries, and medical journals. I looked through the volumes last Christmas and found a little book printed in 1914. That book written by I. J. Van Ness under the authority of the Sunday School Board was entitled *Training in the Baptist Spirit*. In the text Van Ness asked this question: “How can so many independent Baptist churches join together effectively without sacrificing a part of their very own independence?” He continued by stating that the Baptist spirit makes it possible. The Baptist spirit is never indolent or selfish. It finds fulfillment in religious vitality and in its energy. He wrote that cooperation and volunteerism were the glue that holds Baptists together.

You can vote on every document you want to, you can pass everything this State Board can write up, but unless there is a spirit of volunteerism and a spirit of cooperation in Florida we will suffer disassociation no matter what is on paper. It is our heart that holds us together. We are structurally cooperative. That is why in 1925 they called it the Cooperative Program. If you were admitted to Baptist life solely because you gave a certain amount of money it would be the “coercive program,” not the Cooperative Program. If you had to have a certain attendance in Sunday School to get representation on the Board, it would be the “competitive program,” not the Cooperative Program. But it is the Cooperative Program, and together we cooperate. It is the glue that holds us together.

Jesus said he was going to build His church. Don’t forget that conventions are a means; conventions are not a doctrine. We can do without conventions. All we have to have is Christ. Conventions will come and go. Bertha Smith used to say that every time a convention gets a hundred years old they ought to dismantle the whole thing and start over. I am not advocating that today, but she does have a point. When the bureaucracy builds up it is difficult to accomplish God’s purpose in a timely fashion. We found that out on the national level with the restructuring process. Conventions are a means, not a doctrine.

J. B. Gambrell used to say, “Conventions are as strong as the piety and the common sense of a redeemed people.” Hear me today—our Florida Baptist boards are channels, they are not fountains. Boards do not have one dime. Boards do not have anything to give you. The churches give the money. The boards are simply the channels, and the churches use the boards to convey their contributions into a mighty stream of ministry to water arid fields and make the plains come alive with fruit. If you serve on a board, never forget you were elected. You don’t have any money, you don’t have any power, and you are responsible to the people in the pew who work forty hours and sixty hours and eighty hours and give their tenths and send it through the church. We go up to the church, down to the denomination. We can live without an association. We can live without a state convention. We can live without the Southern Baptist Convention, but Jesus said, “I will build my ecclesia.” The church will still be on the horizon when hell is out of business.

Baptists are soul competent. Baptists are scripturally confident. Baptists are structurally cooperative, and fourthly, **Baptists are sovereignly commissioned**. How is Jesus going to build His church? He is going to build it with His plan in Matthew 28:19-20—go make disciples. Have you ever seen a Southern Baptist church that says “missionary Baptist” on the sign. That always confuses me. That is like going to the tooth dentist. If you are a Baptist, you are a missionary. If you are not a missionary, you have got the

wrong sign. We have been sovereignly commissioned to go tell this world about Jesus. It is our job; that is why we are here.

Two years ago I was in a restaurant with one of our Southern Baptist leaders. He looked at me and asked, "How are things in Florida?" I responded, "Things are wonderful in Florida." He asked, "Why are things wonderful in Florida?" I told him things are wonderful in Florida because we have so many people to reach we don't have time to fight. The vision and the burden is larger than anybody's meanness. If we catch anyone trying to cause rips and divisions in the convention to keep us from going out to accomplish our commission to keep us from going out to accomplish our commission we will deal with them behind the curtain, not in front. You see, there is more than one way to be ruled out of order. Where two or three are gathered together and the Spirit of God comes, we need to speak to each other as brothers.

Hear me, Florida Baptists, we are sovereignly commissioned and we must go and tell this world that Jesus saves. There are some of our churches today that seem to be anti-missionary—not missionary Baptists, but anti-missionary. They have come to that interpretation through erroneous exegesis. They so believe that God is sovereign that they don't have to go and tell. I have been asked a thousand times this year, "Are you a Calvinist?" I have said, "No, I am a biblicist." They ask if I believe in the sovereignty of God. I respond, "Probably more than you do." I don't believe you can get saved before God calls you. John 6:44 makes that very, very clear. Salvation begins with a call from God. It doesn't begin with us. Faith is a gift from God. I am not following after John Calvin. We don't baptize infants at our church, but godly Calvinism will thrust you into the fields white unto harvest.

Our first missionaries were believers in sovereign grace and they were on the cutting edge of spreading the gospel around the world. You are anti-missionary if your grace keeps you at home. We believe in grace. We don't believe in falling from grace. We believe in grace grabbing us. Grace takes us, it holds us, and we go and tell that to others. There is an anti-missionary spirit present, but the group that bothers me is the o-missionary bunch. They are "o-missionary." They say they believe in missions and evangelism, but never lift a finger to do anything about it. They will jump and shout and say that you ought to give you money, but they have not been across the street, they have not witnessed, they do not carry the *Four Spiritual Laws* in their pockets. They have this form of godliness, but they are o-missionary. They have made an omission about something. In 1845, the Southern Baptist Convention came together and said, "We are here for the one sacred effort, the propagation of the gospel." That is why we exist.

When I was seventeen I was called to preach on a Friday night, made my announcement on Sunday, and my pastor looked at me and told me I would be preaching the next Sunday night. I told him I hadn't been to school. He told me God didn't call me to go to school, he called me to preach. He said, "We'll get you to school, but you need to practice a while." I started preaching.

Rev. Ed Ashley, a former missionary to Colorado and our Director of Missions, came to me and gave me an outline of Romans 6. I wadded it up and threw it in the trash can. No man would tell me what to preach! I got up on Sunday, preached for about six minutes, and went home and dug that paper out of the trash. I said, "Dear God, I need all the help I can get with this stuff. I can't do it." But I preached in every little country church in North Alabama. I love those preachers. They let me preach to their congregations of six, twelve, and fifteen. I preached a revival in one little church where we had seven the first night and finished with a hundred on Friday night. The people gave me fifty dollars, and I bought a Thompson Chain-Reference King James Version Bible. I have it on my credenza at home. I preach out of the New American Standard these days, but I keep that Thompson Chain right there and study from it.

At my ordination the council questioned me about my theology, asking questions about the virgin birth and the Word of God. They came by and prayed over me. T. P. Germany had tears coming out of his

eyes and said, "It's been years since we had a preacher called in our association, and now God has given us twelve young men. I've been praying for twenty years for God to start calling young men. Bro. Germany from Ider Baptist Church put his hands on me and prayed for me. Old Deacon Patton came by and laid his hands on me. Claude Wheeler put those rough, sawmill hands on my head and prayed over me. As we started out the door for home, Ed Ashley handed me my ordination certificate. He challenged me to take this paper and turn it back in if I ever decided to stop being a Baptist. I believe I am going to leave my paper on the wall. I am a Baptist from my radiator to my tail light, from the top of my red head to the soles of my feet. I am claimed by the blood of the Lamb. I am saved first, baptized following the Lord Jesus, but I thank the Lord God that they baptized me all the way under until it "took." Thank God I am a Southern, Florida, Olive Baptist