

**BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #139:**  
**MISCELLANEOUS BIBLE QUESTIONS ANSWERED**  
By John Temples

It's been my privilege to preach the gospel for 54 years. A great privilege over that time has been to be asked many Bible questions by sincere truth-seekers. I tell people that asking me a Bible question is like saying "sic 'em" to a dog! Here is a random collection of several of those questions and my answers from those 54 years. I don't have all the answers to many questions, but I hope these will help you in your Bible study and stimulate your thinking on various topics.

+++++

QUESTION: Does John 20:23 mean that the apostles had the power to forgive sins?

ANSWER: Here are verses 21-23: "So Jesus said to them again, 'Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.' And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*'"

This text cannot mean that the apostles literally and actually had power to forgive sins, as Catholic priests and popes claim. Only God can forgive sins. Mark 2:7 says, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Furthermore, nowhere in the Biblical record do we find any apostle acting on his own authority and pronouncing anyone's sins forgiven. Acting with Christ's authority, the apostles laid out the terms of pardon which, if followed, would result in forgiveness of sins by God.

There's an interesting record in Acts 8 which reinforces this explanation. Philip, one of the servants of the church in Jerusalem, had been preaching in Samaria, and many people were being baptized (Acts 8:12). One of those baptized was a fellow named Simon, a sorcerer. The apostles Peter and John came to Samaria from Jerusalem to assist Philip. In verses 18-23, we read that Simon observed the miracles of the apostles and tried to bribe them to obtain that power for himself.

Peter strongly rebuked him, telling him that the gift of God could not be bought with money (verse 20). This rebuke led Simon to seek forgiveness. So here we have Peter, supposedly the first “pope,” standing right in front of a sinner seeking forgiveness. This would have been an ideal time for Peter to have said to Simon, “I pronounce your sins forgiven.” But Peter did not—indeed, could not—do that. He told Simon “repent therefore of this your wickedness and *pray God* if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you” (verse 22). This is conclusive proof that Peter did not see himself as authorized by God to directly forgive sins. --John Temples

+++++

QUESTION: Dear Brother: I would like to hear your thoughts on the nature of the cross and especially how we use the term in songs. Please read W.E. Vines’ thoughts on the word *cross* before answering.

ANSWER: Thank you for writing and prompting me to do some research in some areas I had not thought about before, including whether the Lord was crucified on a stake or a cross. Besides studying Biblical passages, I spent some time perusing some scholarly websites. I also read W. E. Vine’s article on the word “cross” (Greek *stauros*) as you suggested. Here is what I found.

Basically, we have to mark the matter of the shape of the crucifixion instrument as “inconclusive.” Historians and scholars come down on both sides of the issue (stake or cross), and both offer compelling evidence. I am aware that Jehovah’s Witnesses, and perhaps some others, think they have conclusive proof of a stake; but they have been selective in their documentation, leaving out some opposing evidence. I also noted that Vine says the Greek word *stauros* “primarily” means a stake. The operative word is “primarily.” This lets us know that there are other possible meanings, including the traditional T (or t) shape. And again, historians are pretty well agreed that the Romans used whatever shapes they preferred or had available; they did not use a stake exclusively.

The most important source, the Bible, is also inconclusive—it does not clearly identify the shape one way or the other. That tells me that it’s not essential for us

to know. However, there is implied evidence in some passages in favor of the traditional T- or t-shape. If a person was crucified straight up on a stake, he died pretty quickly, within minutes; and that is not what the Romans wanted. They wanted to prolong suffering as long as possible. The fact that Jesus lived for some six hours is not a plus for the “stake” advocates.

I also learned that it’s likely Jesus carried only the horizontal cross piece to the place of execution; the vertical part of it was almost certainly already in place, and the entire cross would have been too heavy for even a healthy man to bear. The bottom line, as I see it, is that scholarly research leans toward the traditional T-shape or t-shape for the crucifixion instrument, so I see no reason not to use the term “cross.” I do, however, feel somewhat uncomfortable seeing the cross “sanitized” and made into neon church signs, ornate jewelry, etc. We should not ignore or gloss over what the cross symbolized: *death*. It reminds us of what Jesus was willing to go through for us. --John Temples

+++++

QUESTION: Could a penitent sinner baptize himself? A couple of Sundays ago, our preacher said that if a person were on a barren island, alone, he could baptize himself. He said the Bible does not say it has to be done by another person. This seems too close to just saying one accepts Christ and is therefore saved, except the stranded person does his own baptism. Since this is NOT an idea I have ever heard before, I am asking you to examine this for me and let me know if it could be a possibility or not.

ANSWER: My view agrees with yours—this seems too much like “accepting Christ and being saved.” It smacks of “would’a/could’a/should’a/what if/Lone Ranger/do-it-yourself” religion. God from the beginning chose to make human instrumentality an essential part of the gospel process. “How shall they hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:14). We often tell our denominational friends that there are only three ways to justify a religious practice: (1) direct statement or command; (2) approved example; or (3) implication (sometimes called “necessary inference”). We have none of those for self-baptism. We have:

- *No Command.* Jesus DID command His disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them” (Matthew 28:19). He never said anything about a person baptizing himself, and there is no direct statement in the Bible that comes even close.
- *No Example.* Every time in the Scripture record there was a baptism, there was an immerser and an immersee. I can think of a prime situation in which, had God approved of self-baptism, He would have allowed it: Pentecost. In Acts 2 we read of 3,000 being baptized that day after hearing the first gospel sermon. Now, there were only twelve apostles to do the baptizing, so each of them had to baptize some 250 people. Sure would have been nice if Peter could have just told the crowd, “Repent and baptize yourselves.” But he didn’t.
- *No Implication:* The idea of auto-immersion is just simply foreign to the Scriptures, either directly stated or implied. Your preacher is correct in stating that “the Bible does not SAY that baptism has to be done by another person.” The reason is, it doesn’t have to! Baptism is an act that takes two, an administrator and a candidate. The Greek word originally meant to dye a cloth by submerging it. Might as well tell the cloth to dye itself! It’s the same as saying “the Bible doesn’t SAY not to use instrumental music in worship.” Reason is, it doesn’t have to. It says “sing.”

I asked a preacher friend of mine what he thought about your question of self-baptism. He said his first thought would be “No”—but his second thought would be that if he was in that situation (on a desert island), he would try it anyway! Hope this helps. --John Temples

+++++

QUESTION: What is your view of applause in church or at a baptism?

ANSWER: More and more in recent years, we have seen spontaneous outbursts of applause in our assemblies. Some applaud the efforts of young men in their Sunday night sermons or other accomplishments. Sometimes, there is applause

when a person is baptized into Christ, or when the announcement is made that a member has recovered from a serious medical condition. While I understand that such clapping or applause is sincere, spontaneous, and well-intended, I think it is ill advised. In my view, applause in worship is:

- (1) *Inappropriate and out of place.* Applause in worship takes the focus off God and places it on man. We applaud a musical or dramatic performance, and rightly so. But worship is not a performance. It is a sacred assembly for expressing reverence and praise to God.
- (2) *Distracting.* Clapping can be perceived by many as an irreverent disturbance in a solemn worship environment.
- (3) *Offensive to many.* Christians are charged in Romans 14:13 “not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way.”
- (4) *Selective or inequitable.* One speaker is applauded; another is not. How does the one who is not applauded feel? Applause can lead to a spirit of competition.
- (5) *Open-ended.* Once we start applauding a sermon, where do we stop? Do we applaud all sermons? The song leader? The prayer leader? If we applaud a baptism, do we clap for a restoration? Not only that, once applause is accepted, it becomes hard to discourage shouting “Hallelujah!” or waving one’s hands Pentecostal style.
- (6) *Not authorized in Scripture.* This is the most important reason to refrain. We need Bible authority for all we do or say, and that is particularly important in worship. We have no direct Bible statement or command, no apostolic example, no implied authority for clapping in worship.

So, what are some acceptable ways of expressing approval or appreciation for a powerful sermon, a well-led song, a moving prayer, a baptism, etc.? Here are some:

- (1) *A good old-fashioned spoken “Amen.”* When you say “amen” after a sermon or a prayer, you mean “may it be so” or “I approve.” We have Scriptural authority for saying “amen” in 1 Corinthians 14:6 and several other verses.
- (2) *Private words of praise and encouragement* spoken directly to an individual after a service.

(3) *Immediately singing a song (like "Victory in Jesus") after a person is baptized.* This is our traditional practice and is certainly appropriate.

(4) *A change of life* as a result of a speaker's efforts. In fact, that would be the ultimate compliment to a preacher: applying his words to your life. A preacher loves to hear "You're a great preacher"—but he loves even more to hear "Jesus is a great Lord, and your sermon brought that home to me."

Some sub-questions and further thoughts on the subject:

(1) Is it ever appropriate to applaud in a Christian setting? Yes. It's not wrong to clap to express approval and appreciation for workers at a church meal, for instance. It's fine to clap for a non-religious performance or display of skill at a church outing or other informal fellowship setting.

(2) Isn't applause just another way of saying "amen"? No, the two are not equivalent. "Amen" conveys intelligent meaning; clapping is just noise. And there's at least one other big difference: saying "amen" has Biblical authorization, clapping does not.

(3) Doesn't the Old Testament command God's people to clap? Yes, in Psalms 47:1 and other passages. It also commands them to make animal sacrifices and observe the sabbath. The Old Testament is not our law today.

So in my view, applause in a church setting has a cheapening effect on the worship and its solemnity. --John Temples

+++++

QUESTION: Is James 5:14-15 still applicable today?

ANSWER: Here is James 5:14-15: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." Several questions arise in regard to this passage: Is this a case of healing, and if so, does it refer to miraculous or non-miraculous healing? Should we practice this today?

It is my view that this passage refers to miraculous healing and is thus limited in its full and primary meaning to the first century, when supernatural powers were available in the church. Here are some reasons for this view:

- *A Christian who is sick is told to call, not a doctor, but the elders of the church.* In the normal course of events, it would be more prudent to call a doctor. Even Jesus endorsed this, saying, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Mark 2:17). In the early church, however, many members possessed miraculous gifts; and the elders would be logical recipients of such gifts. In that situation, calling for the elders would be more prudent than seeking a doctor.
- *What James speaks of here involves, not administering medicine or medical treatment, but rather praying over the sick and anointing with oil.* This reinforces the idea that this passage is not speaking of a medical healing. Olive oil has many health benefits, but is not generally regarded as a miracle-working medicine or a treatment for disease and sickness. It was the “prayer of faith” by the elders which saved (cured) the sick person, not the oil.
- *Similarly, it is “the Lord” (not the elders) who raises the sick person up.*
- *Forgiveness of sins is promised . Doctors do not usually provide this service!*
- *Elsewhere in the New Testament, similar actions are connected with the exercise of miraculous gifts.* Mark 6:13, regarding the sending out of the twelve by Jesus, says—“And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them.”

Does this mean that we should not call for the elders (indeed, the whole church) to pray for us when we are sick? No, we should certainly call them. But we should not expect them to heal us by miracle or anointing us with oil. We should take advantage of all that modern medicine has to offer, while still trusting in the Great Physician.

+++++

QUESTION: When Jesus was resurrected from the tomb, He told Mary not to touch Him; yet He told Thomas to put his hand in His side. Can you explain this please?

ANSWER: There was no inherent reason Jesus could not be touched after the resurrection, because He specifically invited Thomas to do so (John 20:27); and He invited all the apostles to "handle" him (Luke 24:39). Also, the same morning, evidently later, Jesus met Mary and "another Mary" (Matthew 28:1). At that time both women "held Him by the feet and worshiped Him" (Matthew 28:10).

So why did Jesus tell Mary not to touch Him? Not because of some esoteric theological reason or, as some commentators have ridiculously supposed, because He was still sore(!); but for a much simpler reason: Jesus had an urgent job for Mary. He told her, "Stop clinging to Me [that's the meaning of the Greek], but go to My brethren" and announce My resurrection (John 20:17b). Matthew reports that an angel told the two Marys, "Go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead" (Matthew 28:7). Jesus gave them the same instruction in Matthew 28:9-10. On the meaning of the Greek, this is from Vincent's New Testament Word Studies: "John 20:17, Touch me not...mee mou haptou. The verb, primarily, means "to fasten to." Hence, it implies here, not a mere momentary touch, but "a clinging to."

+++++

QUESTION: In your church, how is a pastor determined to be fit for duty? To make the transition from whatever (member, elder, etc) to pastor? What type of process is used to 'ordain' a pastor, if that is done? What process for training/education?

ANSWER: First of all, we need to make sure we are talking about the same office when we speak of a "pastor." In most denominational churches, the "pastor" is the preacher and also the "church administrator." But in Bible usage, a pastor and a preacher are two separate positions. In Scripture, a pastor is a shepherd. (We have the word "pastoral" meaning related to the keeping or grazing of sheep or cattle.) So a pastor or shepherd is a keeper (leader and provider) of a flock of Christians. He is a ruling authority in a local church. A preacher, on the other hand,



is a man who serves under the pastors and delivers sermons. A preacher is not a pastor or elder; rather, he serves under the elders in a teaching and preaching capacity.

Two synonyms for pastor or shepherd are “elder” and “bishop.” You can see that a pastor and an elder are the same by looking at Acts 20. Verse 28 is part of an admonition of Paul to the leaders of the church at Ephesus. He says, “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” That’s the reading in the New King James Version. The NIV says, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” Notice the references to a “flock” and being a “shepherd” in this verse. So Paul called these men “shepherds” (pastors). But notice in verse 20 that these men are called elders of the church. This proves that an elder and a shepherd/pastor are the same office.

Another thing we see from these verses is that each original church congregation did not have just one “pastor”; each congregation had multiple pastors/shepherds. This is another way modern denominational churches have departed from the original pattern.

Now to the question: How is a pastor in the church determined to be fit for duty and ordained? Since we now have determined exactly what a “pastor” is—an elder or overseer of a congregation—we can correctly and Scripturally answer that question. Requirements for elders are given in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. These requirements have both moral and doctrinal components which a man must meet to be an elder or bishop/pastor. (Once again, notice that in these texts the terms “elder,” “pastor/shepherd,” and “bishop” are used interchangeably.)

The exact process for finding men who are eligible to be elders is not given in Scripture, but logically the congregation would take the Biblical requirements and use them as a template for selecting men. By the same token, an exact ceremony for installing (moderns like the word “ordaining”) elders or pastors is not given; so congregations have leeway in that area.

About educational requirements for pastors: There is no formal education requirement given in Scripture. No pastoral “degree” is required by God! What is required is that a man have an exemplary character and be able to teach the Bible. I’ve known plenty of good Bible teachers and elders who have no or little formal education. It’s Bible knowledge and character that count.

Well, what about preachers? We have seen that pastors and preachers are two different positions in the church. Basically, the only requirements we find in Scripture for a preacher is that he:

- Must be a man (1 Corinthians 14:34, 1 Timothy 2:11-13).
- Should be an example to the flock in purity, character, and behavior (1 Timothy 4:12).
- Should have the ability to communicate the message of God in a capable way (1 Timothy 4:6, 11, 16; 2 Timothy 1:13, 2:2, 14, 15).

How is a preacher “ordained”? Just as with elders/pastors, there is no formal process given in the Bible. But presumably, since the elders are charged with “feeding” the flock (Acts 20:28 in the King James Version), and given that feeding is a figure of speech for making sure the church is taught the true word of God, then the elders of a congregation would choose the man, based on his character and speaking ability, and appoint him in some kind of public way.

–John Temples