

Theology Series

What is the Church?



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This work is dedicated to my mentors and good friends, Lito Avila, founder of Independent Baptist College of Asia Pacific (IBCAP), Philippines, and Berhanu Yosef, founder of East Africa Baptist Missions (EABM), Ethiopia. You both have shown me what loving Jesus and loving His church looks like. I am forever blessed by being able to see your tireless example of being the church.

Lito, ang iyong kababaang-loob sa pamumuno at pag gabay sa iyong simbahan, at ang iyong masigasig at walang sawang sakripisyo na itaas ang mga kalalakihan at kababaihan ng Diyos upang magtanim ng mga simbahan ay naging isang magandang halimbawa para sa akin na panoorin at sundin.

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Please note that the work of this book is ongoing.

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1

Baptist Distinctives

What makes a Baptist church a Baptist church? We will look at eight distinctive doctrines that Baptist churches generally hold to. When referring to “Baptist Distinctives”, we do not mean that these are doctrines called into being by historic Baptists. Rather, we see these doctrines evidenced in the New Testament and practiced by New Testament churches. It is the goal of Baptist churches to be, as closely as possible, New Testament churches. While some of these distinctives may be upheld by other kinds of churches as well, Baptist churches tend to maintain all the distinctive doctrines listed below.

- The Bible as the believer’s sole authority for faith and practice
- The autonomy of the local church
- The priesthood of all believers
- Individual soul liberty
- Two sacraments of believer’s baptism and commemoration of the Lord’s Supper
- Regenerate and baptized church membership
- Two ordained offices consisting of pastors (also called elders or bishops) and deacons
- Separation of church and state

The reader can readily see that the list of doctrinal distinctives does not include every point of doctrine and theology from the Scriptures. When we talk about church distinctives, we are really discussing how believers and churches, of various theological convictions, fellowship and worship Jesus together.

All believers are part of the same eternal universal family because of the identity and work of Christ. Our unity comes from the identity of Jesus, as fully God and fully Man, and the gospel work of Jesus, in His death, burial, and resurrection. Of course, there are many biblical doctrines that undergird the identity and work of Jesus. These doctrines are commonly referred to as primary doctrines since they uphold who God is and how people can be reconciled to Him. These primary doctrines include the Trinity, original sin, Hell, the dual nature of Christ, Jesus’s virgin birth, Christ’s second coming, and so on. Any denial of these primary doctrines results in false characterizations of who God is and what work He did for mankind. Believers can only have true fellowship with other believers who uphold these primary doctrines of the faith.

While all believers enjoy unity in the primary doctrines of the gospel, there are secondary doctrines that may cause certain believers to separate into different churches in order to keep

unity in the face of having secondary doctrinal differences. These differences are listed as doctrinal distinctives. These distinctives allow for the orderly assembly of like-minded believers, that would be very difficult to have with believers not in agreement with the church's distinctives. Just consider the Baptist distinctive of the autonomy of the local church, and imagine trying to worship in a church where half of the people think a singular bishop should govern that church, and many other churches in the area; while the other half thinks that the congregation should be the voting decision makers. You can imagine similar difficulties if the members of a Baptist church were not like-minded on the distinctives listed above. Yet, most of the distinctives above are not matters of primary gospel importance. A denomination's distinctives are of secondary importance and unify believers into different kinds of churches. The walls that separate these churches should not reach up into the heavens, where all believers will live in complete harmony in belief and worship. Instead, these secondary walls should be only about knee-high, allowing them to be stepped over in order for primary gospel fellowship and work to be shared by all citizens of Christ's kingdom.

Lastly, there are doctrines of even less importance that may vary from one believer to the next within the same church. Examples of these may include certain beliefs on financial giving, beliefs on certain aspects of end times prophecy, and so on. One issue in the apostle Paul's day concerned whether or not eating meat sacrificed to animals was sinful or not (Acts 15 cf. 1 Cor 8:4-13; Titus 1:15).

The following are doctrinal distinctives that allow most Baptists to be able to share in the unity of fellowship and worship, for the regular assembly of its members, while carrying out the Great Commission to make disciple of Jesus.

THE BIBLE AS THE SOLE SOURCE OF AUTHORITY FOR FAITH AND PRACTICE

There are many Christian denominations, sects, and even cults who do not hold to the sole authority of the Scriptures. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox hold other sources as authoritative—such as man-made traditions from church councils and pronouncements made by key leaders in the church. Methodists use the “quadrilateral”, or fourfold approach, to govern their faith and practice. The quadrilateral consists of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Other denominations place authoritative emphases on church creeds and by-laws. Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are known to place the Scriptures as second to the miraculous experiences of the believer. Of course, most, if not all, cults give the highest authority to the cult founder and leaders. This can be evidenced by the Book of Mormon for example.

While all Baptist churches formally hold to the Bible as the believer's sole source of authority, in practice, many may ascribe ultimate authority to the head pastor or the deacons. Of course, we live in a fallen world, and many people are drawn to the cult of personality that some pastors possess. Most evangelical believers can easily identify a list of celebrity pastors, whose books are probably read more than the Bible itself.

To understand where this doctrinal distinctive comes from and why it is so important, let's exegete the supporting "chair" biblical passage, using sound hermeneutics.

¹³ But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴ But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, ¹⁵ and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

¹⁶ All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. ~ 2 Timothy 3:13-17

Verse 13

Paul is giving instruction to the young Pastor Timothy, and he implies that not only did church leaders exist in his day that were "imposters", but he explicitly said that these leaders would get worse and worse. They would pretend to belong to God and would deceive many in the church, concerning the target of their worship, by leading the local church away from God.

Verses 14 and 15

What is Timothy to do to keep from being deceived? Does Paul anywhere explain that since He has installed Timothy as the pastor of a local church, then the people should rely on the authority of Timothy as the source of truth concerning their faith and practice? Does Paul explain that the people should rely upon church traditions, councils, or creeds for the authority of their faith and practice?

Paul lists two sources for authority in this matter. The first is Paul's apostolic authority where he says, "But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*." The fulness of the New Testament had not been written, gathered, and passed around to all the churches yet. Until that happened, the early church relied heavily upon the apostolic leadership and teaching of the apostles; with the last apostle being John, who died around c. AD 98.

It should be noted that apostolic teaching was based upon the Hebrew Scriptures and what the apostles learned from Jesus directly. The following promise by Jesus makes this clear.

²⁵ "These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. ~ Jn 14:26

Indeed, it was in this manner that they taught and wrote the Scriptures themselves—for "even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" concerning the works of Jesus.

The second source of authority was the Holy Scriptures “which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” The written Scriptures being referred to, at that point in time is the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament. After His resurrection, Jesus joined two men on the road to Emmaus and explained how all the Old Testament Scriptures pointed to the identity and work of Jesus as the God and Savior of the world (Lk 24). Christians are to “contend for the faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). Today the church has the fulness of God’s intended revelation that was once and for all written in the sixty-six books of the Bible. Being “once and for all” means that the authoritative revelation is not ongoing but is in fact complete and finished in the Bible.

Verse 16a

Paul then goes even further in explaining to Timothy the basis for the authority of the Scriptures alone. He said, “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.*” This is quite a statement!

Let’s look at it more closely in the original Greek language:

All (pas): Paul is referring to every last word, *yod*, and *tittle* of the Scriptures. Paul’s Master, Jesus, expressed the degree of authority of the Scriptures when he said:

¹⁷ Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. ~ Matt 5:17, 18

Where the *yod* is the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and the *tittle* is even smaller yet. It is a small pen-stroke that distinguishes one Hebrew letter from another. An example of this can be seen when comparing the Hebrew letters *resh* (ר) and *daleth* (ד). The *tittle* on *daleth* extends just a bit to the right of the vertical stroke (circled below), and it distinguishes *daleth* from *resh* for the reader.



In other words, Paul is referring to all the Scriptures—even to the smallest detail.

Scripture (graphe): This word means “writings”. The church has never been without God’s written revelation, concerning Himself and His people. The church relies upon these revelations as written in their inspiration and transmission and not in oral form. At the time this epistle was written by Paul to Timothy, the church had the Old Testament and possibly some books of the New Testament available to them. Remember that all of the Old Testament testify of Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. Referring to the Old Testament, Jesus said:

³⁹ You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. ~ Jn 5:39

Luke records that after Jesus' resurrection, He appeared incognito to two men walking on the road to Emmaus, whose hopes in Jesus was dashed and discussing all the things that had just happened in His trial, crucifixion, and reportedly emptied tomb. On the path, Jesus listened to them and replied with the following:

... "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" ²⁷ And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. ~ Lk 24:25-27

Given by inspiration of God (theopneustos): The last part of the phrase, in 2 Timothy 3:16a, comes from just a single Greek word. The single Greek word, *theopneustos*, means God-breathed. This word explains the source of even the smallest detail of Scripture as coming from God, Himself. Compare to 2 Pet 1:20-21.

²⁰ ...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, ²¹ for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

What a sure Word we have—*Pas graphe theopneustos!*

Verse 16

Profitable. Beneficial and of high value. Not only does the Scriptures come from God, but they benefit believers. Profitable is used here as an adjective that describes each noun in the list that follows in the passage—doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. This list of words also builds on each other as well. The Scriptures are profitable for doctrine (right belief to be practiced), but if that is violated, then they are also profitable for reproof (convincing one on the wrong path), once that is done, they are profitable for correction (convincing of the right way), and so on.

Paul is not speaking vaguely when he calls these items profitable. In fact, in verse 17 he explains exactly how they profit us. These four items, found only in God's Word, together will thoroughly equip every believer into the doing and obedience of what Jesus has commanded His church to do.

Verse 16

Doctrine. Teaching imparted by an authoritative source. Biblical doctrine is that which incorporates the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) and draws conclusions based on that which seems most closely aligned with the character of our unchanging God (Num 23:19; Heb 13:8). Doctrine encompasses what we believe and therefore determines what we teach others,

how we worship and how we live. So, we must be careful about what we believe and present as truth.

Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you. ~ 1 Tim 4:16

Many Bible studies focus on studying various chapters or even whole books of the Bible. This is perfectly fine as long as doctrine is taught in the class as well. Contemporary Christianity has become very averse to wanting to learn doctrine. The popular statement is that “Christians should be filled with heart knowledge—not head knowledge.” This couldn’t be farther from the truth. Unless doctrinal truths are understood by the believer, no transformation of the heart can take place. Also, there are many believers hold to correct doctrine, yet so few understand the biblical reasons why they do. Here are some key reasons why doctrine is beneficial for all believers.

- Doctrine helps us understand the nature and character of God.

*Before the mountains were brought forth,
Or ever You had formed the earth and the world,
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. ~ Psa 90:2*

*Clouds and darkness surround Him;
Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. ~ Psa 97:2*

God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” ~ Jn 4:24

- Doctrine helps us understand the path of salvation through faith.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast. ~ Eph 2:8-9

...That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. ~ Rom 10:9-10

- Doctrine gives instruction for the church.

How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. ~ 1 Cor 14:26

- Doctrine instructs God’s standard of holiness for our lives.

¹⁴...as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; ¹⁵but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”

¹⁷ And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; ~ 1 Pet 1:14-17

Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. ¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? ²⁰For you were bought at a price; therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's. ~ 1 Cor 6:18-20

Understanding biblical doctrine is essential to keep from being deceived and ensures God is being worshipped in spirit and in truth. All the traits of biblical doctrine are in direct opposition to the doctrines of men. So, believers must be able to discern true doctrine in order to offer God true worship.

*⁷And in vain they worship Me,
Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' ~ Mk 7:7*

³If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, ⁴he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, ⁵useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself. ~ 1 Tim 6:3-5

¹³Therefore the Lord said:

*"Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths
And honor Me with their lips,
But have removed their hearts far from Me,
And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men, ~ Isa 29:13*

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. ~ Matt 7:15

¹ But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. ² And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³ By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber. ~ 2 Pet 2:1-3

¹ Beloved do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ~ 1 Jn 4:1

³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers... ~ 2 Tim 4:3

Listen to how Jesus describes any of His followers who know and obey sound doctrine:

²⁴ “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock... ~ Matt 7:24

Verse 16

Reproof. Convincing others through refuting wrong belief or wrong action. Reproof is holding up a “Wrong Way” sign in love of the person going down the path away from the Truth God has given us. The wrong path can cause great harm to many people including the wayward traveler himself. People will not usually turn from their path unless they can be convinced that they are going in the wrong direction.

Verse 16

Correction. Causing someone to move from a direction of fault to a direction that is correct. Once a person is convinced the wayward path they are on is the wrong way (reproved), they need to be further convinced that the right way is the path they should take. Otherwise, the person may just choose another wrong path instead.

Together, “reproof” and “correction” combine to uphold the biblical principle of “putting off and putting on” that is at the heart of a believer’s sanctification.

²⁰ But you have not so learned Christ, ²¹ if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: ²² that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, ²³ and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, ²⁴ and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. ~ Eph 4:20-24

When a believer is struggling with issues of sin, biblical counsel does not just seek to stop a person’s wrong think or wrong action (put off). Those wrong thoughts or actions need to be replaced with proper thinking and proper action (put on). Explicit examples of putting off various sins and replacing them with righteous actions are given in Ephesians 4:25-32. For example, stealing should be put off and replaced with working and giving to those in need. Again, the authority of the Scriptures alone, coming from God, addresses everything we need to rightly serve Him.

Verse 16

For Instruction in righteousness. Instruction refers to training. Believers are to be well trained in the understanding and exercise of God’s laws.

Verse 16

That the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. This is one of the main passages that informs the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. Paul is telling Timothy that the Scriptures contain everything concerning the doctrines of the faith, and for living out our lives in a way that God calls “good”.

Summary of Interpretation Concerning 2 Timothy 3:13-16

Concerning the doctrinal distinctive of the Bible as our sole source of authority then, we can summarize the passage of 2 Timothy 3:13-16, where Paul explains to Timothy that in order to keep from being deceived, he can rely on the Scriptures. Paul explains that the Scriptures come from God Himself and are therefore trustworthy and reliable for understanding true doctrine; so, believers can understand things that are wrong and be able to correct them. Because of that, they are perfect for being able to instruct believers in obeying God's laws to the degree that they are thoroughly sufficient, by themselves, to give believers all they need for their sanctification in their knowledge and wisdom of living for God and growing as Jesus' disciples.

THE AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Autonomy means self-rule (*auto* means self and *nomos* mean law or rule). Baptists believe in the self-governance of the local church. In other words, every local church should be independent of a hierarchical framework or outside governmental structure and is equipped to make its own decisions.

King Jesus is Head over the Church

The starting point to understanding church polity, or church governance, is to know that Christ is the Head of the church.

*²² The stone which the builders rejected
Has become the chief cornerstone. ~ Psa 118:22*

¹⁸ And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. ~ Matt 28:18-20

²² And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church... ~ Eph 1:22

⁸ Therefore He says:

*"When He ascended on high,
He led captivity captive,
And gave gifts to men."*

¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ... ~ Eph 4:8, 12 cf. Psa 68:18

²³ For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. ~ Eph 5:23

³ But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. ~ 1 Cor 11:3

¹⁸ And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. ~ Col 1:18

¹⁰ and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. ~ Col 2:10

While Christ is the Head of the church, what human organizational structure should the church have in order to govern the church in an orderly way? The differences in style of church polity is one reason there exists so many kinds of churches today. Just as it would be impossible for one nation to have more than one style of government coexisting with each other, say a

monarchy and a republic, a church having a mixed bag of contradictory government structure would also fall apart quickly.

Since Baptists believe in the sole authority of the Scriptures, church polity should be derived biblically. Certain questions of the biblical text should be considered when discovering New Testament church polity. What biblical commands exist in the structure, or decision making, of the original churches? Any commands, such as ordaining male leaders in the church, would be prescriptive requirements for churches then and now. How did the early churches in the Bible conduct themselves? While these observations would be more descriptive than prescriptive in nature, we must also consider that the apostles themselves were the ones planting churches and setting up their basic structure as well. Note that questions of church polity are the target of this investigation and not types of churches, such as house churches, mega churches, and churches meeting in synagogues or schools.

Church polity is also derived by the biblical doctrines held by the church. Some churches believe that not all believers are part of the priesthood of Christ. Therefore, that church's polity demands there to be a ruling clergy, or priestly class, that intercedes on behalf of a lower laity class. Other questions must be considered such as whether the titles of pastor, elder, and bishop refer to different responsibilities of a single man, or whether those titles refer to different offices held by different men? How are the visible and invisible aspects of the church defined and how do they relate to each other? There are many more doctrines to be considered, and hopefully, the reader can readily see that the study of the church, *ecclesiology*, is a very large and exciting field of study that will challenge and hone one's theology and understanding in order to better worship God "in spirit and in truth."

Historically, there are three forms of church polity: Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational. While all these forms exist in various modified forms, the congregational churches make up the lion's share of autonomous churches. Each form of church polity is introduced below in admittedly short fashion. Since our focus is on Baptist distinctives, there will be more detail supplied for the congregational churches.

Episcopal Church Polity

While the Episcopal church refers to the Anglican denomination in the United States, episcopal church polity refers to a any hierarchical structure with the chief authority over multiple churches residing in a bishop.

"Episcopal" comes from the Greek word, *episkopos*. This is also where we get our English word for "bishop" or "overseer" (1 Tim 3:1-7). Depending upon each type of episcopal church tradition, an archbishop or a patriarch typically acts as the single leader of the church and oversees all other local churches. Some authority of the bishop may also be shared with lay and clerical councils.

Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and some Lutheran and Methodist churches are known for this kind of church government. While other denominations may not hold to an episcopal polity in belief, they may hold to it in practice. One example of this is the concept are multi-site churches that tend to operate with one head pastor in charge of multiple local churches. Also, some churches may claim to have presbyterian or congregational polity, but in reality, have a single “bishop” or “strong pastor” over a local church who has final authority.

The episcopal church structure has been the most prevalent form of polity throughout most of church history. Even today, it is the most widely held form of church polity across Christendom (the “Christianized” world—made up of true and false churches). The episcopal form of church polity started taking shape during the second century for two reasons.

The first was for the reason of combating false teaching in the church. Ignatius (early 2nd century) elevated the position of the bishop above the presbyters (elders) stating, “I exhort you to study to do all things with a divine harmony, while your bishop presides in the place of God, and your presbyters in the place of the assembly of the apostles, along with your dear deacons, who are most dear to me, and are entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ.” Many pastors of small churches had difficulty in adequately defending the faith against more learned false teachers of the day, and the result was some churches capitulating to false doctrine. To help with this, well-educated, and seasoned, bishops would be assigned over a city and would have authority over all the local elders and congregations of that city.

The second reason was due to the marriage of church and state, that occurred in the fourth century after Emperor Diocletian’s Great Persecution of the church (AD 303-313), when Emperor Constantine called together church councils (e.g., The Council of Nicaea in AD 325) and became a decisive voice in various church matters. The hierarchical terminology and structure of the Roman empire was adopted into the church terminology and structure beginning during this time. Terminology, such as giving the Bishop of Rome the title Pontifex Maximus (High Priest), continued to evolve the authoritative episcopate structure of the church. Just as America has towns, counties, and states (smaller to greater), the Roman Empire had provinces, diocese, and parishes (smaller to greater). The episcopate even divided the churches into hierarchical regions similar to the empire as well, except in reverse—parishes, diocese, and provinces (smaller to greater).

It is usually considered that the bishops of an episcopal polity derive their authority from an unbroken, personal Apostolic Succession from the Twelve Apostles of Jesus. Bishops with such authority are known as the historic episcopate. Both the Roman Catholic Pope and the Patriarchs of Orthodox churches are given this authority. Since Methodist bishops trace their ordinations from the Anglican priest and theologian, John Wesley, they do not hold to apostolic succession.

While battling Gnosticism, Irenaeus (c. AD 125-202), was the first to argue for the “notion of apostolic succession.” Irenaeus was trying to point out that the churches that had true teaching

can actually trace their pastors, and their teaching, to various apostles of Christ since they were only several generations removed from them. On the other hand, Irenaeus showed that the churches upholding the false teaching of Gnosticism could not trace their pastors in such a way, implying that the teaching had changed in those churches and were therefore false.

At the time, Irenaeus had a valid extra-biblical argument. It only took time however for this extra-biblical argument to become a platform for ultimate authority over the church itself. In spite of indicating congregational involvement in choosing bishops in his day, Cyprian solidified the requirement for apostolic succession for bishops.

Presbyterian Church Polity

Presbyterian – A hierarchical structure with the chief authority over multiple regional churches residing in a presbytery (body of elders or general assembly) rather than in a single person.

Presbyterian comes from the Greek word, *presbuteros*, which is translated as “the bearded one” or in short, “elder”. In historically Protestant denominational churches, the local board of elders answers to a higher district-level board of elders, which is made up of select elders to represent each church. Ultimately, the final board of elders (sometimes called the general assembly) has authority on matters, over churches, in that denomination.

Congregational Church Polity

Congregationalism – Final decision-making rests with the congregation of each local church. The New Testament does not uphold pure congregationalism. Pure congregationalism, or a pure democracy, in which the congregation decides every single church issue, is impractical and unbiblical. What is typically seen in the New Testament is a modified congregationalism that places major decisions on the corporate body while leaving day-to-day ministry and administration to the elders and deacons. This leaves the church able to focus on doing the work of the ministry, while the pastors (also called elders and bishops) concentrate on shepherding the flock toward maturity in Christ, as the deacons assist through service (Acts 20:28).

In the Bible we see matters of governance left to local congregations in an autonomous setting regarding the following:

- Church Discipline

*¹⁵ “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ ¹⁷ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.
~ Matt 18:15-17*

- Sending of Missionaries

Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. ~ Acts 13:1-3

- Supporting Missions

¹⁵ Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. ¹⁶ For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities. ~ Phil 4:15-16

- Local Churches Held Accountable (Rev 2:8,12,18; 3:1,7)

- The following is from Acts 14:26-15:21

14:26 Paul and Barnabas go back to their local sending church.

14:27 They give a mission report to the local church congregation.

15:1 There were certain teachers in the church at Antioch that taught a doctrine that was causing confusion. In other words, the local churches were thinking independently.

15:2 Membership in the local church made the determination.

15:3 The local church was seeking advice from the local church at Jerusalem.

15:4 They were received of the local church at Jerusalem.

15:6-21 The matter at hand is discussed by the church.

Extra-biblically (testimony outside of the Bible), we know that this New Testament polity, consisting of elder leadership and congregational accountability, continued through the time of the early church father, Clement of Rome (AD 95). Clement identified "bishops and deacons" as the appointed officers of the local church, with no distinction between bishops and elders. So, we see autonomy in that every local church had its own bishops (also called pastors or elders).

THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

This is the belief that all born-again believers have the privilege of direct access to God and are being pressed into priestly service. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers underlies the congregational form of church polity. The Old Testament priest stood between God and man as an intermediary between the two. They offered the sacrifices and performed all ceremonial acts of worship. They were keepers of the Tabernacle and later the Temple. They would burn the incense and sprinkle the blood of the sacrifices upon the altar. But now, because of the shedding of the blood from the Lord Jesus Christ, (which makes access to God possible), all believers can go directly to God as a result of our right standing before Him. We have the necessary way to be priests before a Holy God.

Entrance Made Possible Through Jesus's Atonement

- Jesus is our eternal High Priest

¹¹ But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. ¹² Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. ~ Heb 9:11-12

- Jesus is the only Mediator between God and man

*For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus
~ 1 Tim 2:5*

- Veil is rent in two

⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.⁵¹ Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split... ~ Matt 27:50, 51

- Partition between Gentiles and Jews is broken down

¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, ¹⁵ having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. ¹⁷ And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. ~ Eph 2:14-18

- Access made available to all who believe

For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. ~ Eph 2:18

Key Verses Concerning the Priesthood of All Believers.

- Royal priesthood (Compare Exo 19:6 to I Pet 2:9)

⁶ And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. ' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel. ' ~ Exo 19:6

⁹ But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light... ~ I Pet 2:9

- Believers are kings and priests

⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth.

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, ⁶ and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ~ Rev 1:5-6

- Believers can come boldly before the throne

¹⁴ Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. ~ Heb 4:14-16

- Believers enter through the blood

¹⁹ Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, ²¹ and having a High Priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ~ Heb 10:19-22

- Offer spiritual sacrifices

⁵ you [plural] also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ~ I Peter 2:5

- Intercession for all

Therefore, I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, ² for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. ³ For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God and one Mediator between God and

men, the Man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time... ~ I Timothy 2:1-6

Compare the Old Testament to the New Testament Priesthood

<u>OT PRIESTHOOD</u>	<u>TRAIT</u>	<u>NT PRIESTHOOD</u>
Lev 21:17-23	No Blemish	Eph 5:25-27
Ezra 2:62	Proof of Genealogy	Jn 1:12; Rom 13:12-14; Eph 6:11
Exo 28:40,41	Special Garments	Rev 19:8
Exo 29:21	Purified Blood	1 Pet 1:19

Duties of the Priesthood

A Priesthood is not individualistic. Many Christians in America that wrongfully practice their faith individualistically with a wrong belief in a “priesthood of the believer”. The priest does not exist outside of a priesthood—no such priestly identity exists, and no such priestly service exists. Jesus did not become the high priest over a bunch of individual priests. He became high priest over the church, which is the priesthood of ALL believers.

Many believers do not understand the difference between the universal church and the local church. The result is that many of them practice their faith doing however they want while never feeling as if they are an intimate part of any local church. Either due to minor theological disagreements, past hurts, etc., they grow accustomed to not being much of a part of a local church and believe it is ok due to their “membership” in the universal church.

They are deceived by this wrong belief. While the universal church exists and is made up of all church members past, present, and future, it has not been realized yet. The universal church is eschatological in nature. It will be realized as we rule with Christ on earth in our new glorified bodies. At that point, our service will be through the universal church.

For now, the local church is the full expression of the universal church in each location, and the duties of the priesthood—the living and working out of our faith—happens for King Jesus through the local church. We are not priests without a priesthood. Our priestly service can only be practiced in the service of the priesthood, or local body of Christ.

So, what are our priestly duties we should be practicing? Below list the key duties of our priestly service:

1. Sacrifice
 - a. Self-sacrifice of the believer (Rom 12:1; Phil 2:17)
 - b. Sacrifice of praise (Heb 13:15)
 - c. Sacrifice of good works (Heb 13:16)
 - d. Sacrifice of new converts (Rom 15:16)

2. Witness

- a. Priesthood proclaims praise for calling us out of darkness and into the light (1 Pet 2:9)
- b. Priesthood proclaims the message of the gospel as ambassadors of Christ (2 Cor 5:20)
- c. Priesthood lives holy lives before the world (1 Pet 2:12)
- d. Priesthood considers the church as the temple where they perform their priestly acts so that God's glory can be displayed as He resides in His temple (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19-20)

3. Intercession

- a. Intercession for physical needs (Acts 12:5, 12)
- b. Missionary activity (Acts 13:3)
- c. Spiritual needs of the church (Acts 14:23; Eph1 :16-23; 3:14-21)
- d. For those outside the faith (Acts 7:60; Rom 10:1; 1 Tim 2:1-2)

INDIVIDUAL SOUL LIBERTY

As a definition, individual soul liberty maintains that every individual, whether a believer or an unbeliever, has the freedom to choose what his conscience or soul dictates is right in the religious realm. Every person will stand alone before God and be judged according to either their own works, for unbelievers, or based on the imputed righteous work of Christ, for believers. Because of this, soul liberty allows a person to accept responsibility for his own actions and not try to force anyone else to do, or believe, anything contrary to his own conscience. However, this liberty is not a justification for disobeying God. The believer must still act according to the principles of Scripture and honor the doctrinal position of the Bible-believing church to which he belongs. The priesthood of all believers and individual soul liberty overlaps a bit as they both deal with the issue of freedom within the confines of the will of God. Since all believers are priests belonging to a priesthood, all have soul liberty to hear God's commands by studying the Scriptures and speaking directly to God in prayer in search of wisdom. In other words, there is no separation between a priestly class of believers and a laity class of believers that would make the laity class obey the priestly class in belief and practice.

A Short History Concerning Individual Soul Liberty

There are many examples throughout church history where this New Testament doctrine was challenged, and the independency of people's beliefs were stifled, or even forbidden. After the Great Persecution of Christians by Roman Emperor, Diocletian (AD 311), Emperor Constantine legalized the practice of Christianity when he issued the Edict of Milan (AD 313). However, it wasn't until Emperor Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica (AD 380) that Christianity was declared to be the official religion of the Roman Empire and was agreed to by concurrent emperors Gratian and Valentinian II. It stated the following:

It is our desire that all the various nations which are subject to our Clemency and Moderation, should continue to profess that religion which was delivered to the Romans by the divine Apostle Peter, as it has been preserved by faithful tradition, and which is now professed by the Pontiff Damasus and by Peter, Bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic holiness. According to the apostolic teaching and the doctrine of the Gospel, let us believe in the one deity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, in equal majesty and in a holy Trinity. We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics and shall not presume to give to their conventicles the name of churches. They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation and in the second the punishment of our authority which in accordance with the will of Heaven we shall decide to inflict.

In that edict, there are two explicit statements that served to crush individual soul liberty. First, the Nicene form of Christianity was to be the official religion of Rome as defined by the

professions of Damasus, the Bishop of Rome, referred to above as “Pontiff,” or High Priest, and by Peter, who was the Bishop of Alexandria. These two men represented Christian ecclesiastical authority over the West from Rome and the East from Alexandria. What they professed had both the legal authority of Rome and the doctrines to be believed and followed by all professing Christians of the Roman Empire.

Second, anyone, or any group, holding beliefs or practice contrary to the form of Christianity described in the edict was considered to be heretical and would be condemned by God and suffer punishment at the whim of the Roman government.

The result of this law was that all people in the Roman Empire became “Christians”. The masses were forced into Christianity through infant baptism and a meaningless profession of faith by adults. Later, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and mainline Protestant denominations would dictate whatever “truth” it deemed necessary to force conformity upon all their members.

Today, Baptists would do well to avoid the denial of this doctrine in their practice. Pastors who overlord their flocks, or churches that submit themselves to denominational control, will need to return again to the Scriptures concerning this vital historical Baptist distinctive. To demand, whether directly or indirectly, that believers submit to any kind of authoritarian rule is both unscriptural and, in fact, questionable. The reputation of Baptist churches has been greatly sullied by such authoritarian rule over its members. Whenever believers give up their individual soul liberty in favor of following the demands of another person or affiliation, they do indeed compromise this essential doctrine of the faith.

Biblical Implications of Individual Soul Liberty

Of all the Baptist distinctives, this issue of soul liberty is probably the one most fraught with difficulties, discrepancies, and disagreements. Leaders often give no room for personal convictions that may differ from their own viewpoint. Believers are often quick to judge, to criticize, and to give an opinion where none is asked for. Issues that should be minor may rise to a level where anyone who takes another position becomes the enemy. The church’s responsibility is to clearly present the Scriptures to convince believers of their need to submit and obey what God says. Nevertheless, the church should not threaten, bully, or intimidate its members into submission. Christians should desire to live godly lives because they are freely convinced that they ought to do so, not because someone forces godliness upon them.

There appears to be widespread ignorance of this Baptist distinctive, at least in practice if not in belief. Since it is a biblical issue, it is certainly worthy of serious biblical study and consideration.

So, as Baptists, we must always go back to our first distinctive, which is the sole authority of the Scriptures, or *Sola Scriptura*. Below are the chair passages for the Baptist doctrinal distinctive of individual soul liberty.

After Jesus's resurrection, Jesus restored Peter from his sin into relationship with Himself. Jesus also related to Peter how he would die. He then commanded Peter to "Follow Me." Right after that, Peter turned and saw the disciple, John, and asks Jesus, "But Lord, what about this man?" Jesus's answer in verse 22, liberates us individually into a submission and obedience of following Jesus, and not into any belief or practice based on comparisons of other believers or based on past experiences—whether good or bad. God has a wonderful plan of obedience and victory for each individual believer!

Jesus said to him, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me."
~ Jn 21:22

Our individual soul liberty should not discourage other believers with different views, nor should it tempt other believers to lose their integrity over their convictions. On the other hand, the weaker believer must not condemn a brother or sister who is faithfully following Christ.

⁵ One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰ But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. ¹¹ For it is written:

*"As I live, says the Lord,
Every knee shall bow to Me,
And every tongue shall confess to God."*

¹² So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.

²¹ It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. ~ Rom 14:5-12, 21

Individual soul liberty can cause division, but it shouldn't. The individual differences that exist are a great opportunity to part peaceably, knowing that those differences could cause more avenues for the preaching of the gospel.

³⁹ Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so, Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; ~ Acts 15:39

11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. ~ Acts 17:11

Individual soul liberty for faith and practice requires a lot of work to be informed by the Scriptures while being humbly committed to the local church in understanding the truths of Scriptures.

The implications on soul liberty include at least the following:

- Believers are free to choose their actions and beliefs according to the dictates of their consciences as guided by the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and good teachers.
- One believer's set of standards and/or theological ideas may differ from another believer's set. One must allow for differing levels of spiritual maturity, opinion, education, and conviction. It's unwise to force an artificial uniformity over everyone.
- Liberty does not excuse disobedience. One cannot disobey the clear teaching of Scripture by appealing to his freedom of conscience. One's conscience must bow to biblical authority.
- A believer's ultimate accountability is to God and not to other people. Others may offer rebuke and correction only when necessary and appropriate.
- Churches still have influence over individual believers; however, that influence is through persuasion, not through force. Believers may disagree with their leaders and refuse to follow them under certain circumstances.
- One should allow room for others to practice liberty, especially in areas not directly addressed in the Bible. Grant some leeway in allowing others to decide what is and what is not a significant issue.
- Many of the issues that so stridently divide believers are really matters of liberty and conscience rather than clearly defined black and white issues of right and wrong.
- The proper exercise of soul liberty presupposes, and actually requires, a strong personal relationship with the Lord. As believers spend time with Him, they sense their own limitations and weaknesses, and become far less prone to being judgmental of others.

What Individual Soul Liberty Is Not

Sadly, we Christians are prone to wander. Until our sanctification is complete, there will always be a bit of antinomianism in all of us that seeks to do Christianity the way we want to conceive of it. It is for that reason that we need to discuss the limitations on soul liberty.

- Soul liberty is never a justification for disobeying Scripture. An individual may choose to disobey, but soul liberty does not justify his disobedience. Liberty is not a license to sin.

- Soul liberty does not grant the right to do something which will harm another's walk with God. Mature believers should not flaunt their freedom or use it to the extent that it upsets or offends a weaker believer. See Rom 14:19-23.
- Soul liberty does not make the Christian a law unto himself. We are part of the body of Christ, and that partnership in the body is realized through participation in the local assembly. We have an obligation to give to and to gain from that assembly. Soul liberty does not revoke our commitment to church life.
- Soul liberty does not permit a believer to disregard others' liberty. Our liberty stops where it infringes on another's right to exercise his free choice. Each believer must allow other believers to exercise Christian liberty.
- Soul liberty limits how believers interact with one another. In regards to the errors of others, believers are limited to correction, rebuke and moral persuasion. One should not attempt to force his beliefs or standards on another. He can teach and advise but not compel.
- Soul liberty demands that individuals be free to hold their own standards and convictions even when they diverge from the "conventional wisdom." All standards, convictions and viewpoints should be based squarely on clear biblical teaching rather than on someone else's ideas.

To summarize, we can say that we are quite strictly limited from interfering with the liberty of another and even more strictly limited from totally free exercise of liberty ourselves. Individual soul liberty is very much a "mind your own business" (or "What is that to thee?") principle.

Soul Liberty and the Church

There are times when believers can and should refuse to follow the leadership of their pastor(s). One should not follow a blind guide into the ditch (Lk 6:39). One need not subscribe to false or inaccurate doctrine. One need not feel compelled, or forced, to do anything against his own theological position. One need not participate in anything he deems to be foolish, dangerous, or inappropriate. However, a believer should be open to learn and to follow the leadership of his pastor(s). Churches should allow some "wiggle room" so individuals can hold theological viewpoints that may differ somewhat from the official position of the church. Churches should also not dictate behavior on matters that the Bible says nothing about. Churches may advise and suggest on such matters, but they should not force compliance when there is no direct biblical teaching. If a believer finds that he is constantly at odds with church leadership, he should find another church. Generally speaking, though, a church member should seek to follow the leadership of his church.

Perversions of Soul Liberty

Soul liberty is neglected or misunderstood because it is easily perverted. One way that soul liberty is perverted is that individuals may see themselves as not subject to any kind of discipline, teaching, or persuasion. It is easy to develop a “just me and my Bible” attitude, where one refuses to acknowledge anyone else’s influence. Such a person may drop out of church altogether because he refuses to be taught or led. One might even argue that soul liberty leads to the fracturing and fragmentation of Christianity. However, believers must submit to the Bible and to legitimate spiritual leadership from pastors and others. Believers must seek to balance their own personal spirituality with the requirements of church authority. To refuse such leadership and teaching is to pervert the doctrine of individual soul liberty.

Another perversion of soul liberty happens when believers neglect their responsibility to encourage, warn, exhort, and rebuke one another. If one thinks that he has no right to advise a fellow believer, he will never confront him about his sin. Soul liberty should not prevent a Christian from his duty toward other believers. However, one must ensure that he is confronting someone over a genuine sin, not over an issue of personal freedom.

A third misuse of this doctrine occurs when believers are unconcerned about their testimonies. That is, they care little about what other believers think of them, and they may prove to be poor examples and even stumbling blocks for weaker brethren. Such people become defiant in the flaunting of their perceived freedoms. But Paul teaches that believers should do nothing that would cause a weaker believer to stumble or be offended (Rom 14:21). Believers must ensure that they don’t tempt fellow Christians to violate their consciences. One should practice his soul liberty in a quiet, respectful, non-offensive way.

A fourth perversion of soul liberty occurs when churches allow eccentric and even heretical views to exist without properly addressing them. That is, if each believer is allowed his own opinion and viewpoint, and if the church does not demand that members adhere to a common set of beliefs, then the church will soon degenerate to the point where there is no agreement on doctrinal issues. The church, as a whole, must demand that believers subscribe to basic biblical teachings and to those distinctives that characterize the church. Every member must subscribe to and support the doctrinal statement of the church. However, a church should not intimidate its members or force them to adopt any teaching or practice that lacks solid biblical support. Those who don’t agree with what the church teaches or stands for are free to find another church.

Conclusion

Baptists have historically insisted that every individual has the liberty to choose what his conscience or soul dictates is right in the religious realm. Soul liberty asks the believer to accept responsibility for his own actions and not try to force anyone else to do something contrary to his own conscience. Refusal to acknowledge and accept the concept of soul liberty, and failure to grant it to another, is actually a doctrinal violation.

One of the difficulties of the Christian life is to balance one's own personal standards, convictions, and doctrinal views with those held by his church. On the one hand, each individual believer is responsible for himself before God. He must be free to develop his own unique set of beliefs and standards. On the other hand, the believer is (or should be) a member of a church, and that church imposes its standards and beliefs upon the believer. Believers must seek to integrate and harmonize personal spirituality and church life so that what they believe personally is what their church stands for and teaches as well.

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