

Feds Forced Churches to Get Baptism Permits

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Pastor Jim Privett of Gladden Baptist Church performs a baptism in a Missouri creek.

For as far back as anyone can remember, Missouri Baptists have gathered on river banks for Sunday afternoon baptisms.

The preacher leads the new believers into the water, draped in white robes as a choir sings, “Shall We Gather at the River.”

It’s the way it’s been done for generations – baptizing in creeks, lakes, and rivers “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

But now the long-cherished tradition of “taking the plunge” has been drawn into a controversy with the federal government.

Many Christians believe the Bible commands new followers of Christ to be baptized immediately after their conversion.

The National Park Service began enforcing a policy recently that required churches to obtain special use permits in order to baptize in public waters. As part of the same permit process, the NPS also mandated that churches give the Park Service 48 hours advance notice of pending baptisms.

But as any Baptist or Pentecostal in good standing knows – that’s a problem. “If the Holy Spirit is working on Sunday morning, you’re going to baptize Sunday afternoon,” Dennis Purcell told The Salem News. “You may not know ahead of time.”

Many Christians believe that the Bible commands new followers of Christ to be baptized immediately after their conversion. It’s a public expression and celebration of their new-found faith in Christ.

The National Park Service told local churches the permits were needed to “maintain park natural/cultural resources and quality visitor experiences, specific terms and conditions have been established.”

The feds also closed vehicle access to a sandbar along a popular creek in the Ozark Mountains, meaning churches could no longer drive their elderly members to the outdoor baptisms. And to make sure the Baptists behaved, they placed large boulders in the area to block car traffic.

“Like the Baptists and Pentecostals are going to harm natural resources and adversely affect quality visitor experiences by occasionally baptizing new converts?” asked local resident Lewis Leonard. “I can think of a whole lot more activities along the river ways that are not conducive to maintain the natural resources.”

Rep. Jason Smith fired off a letter to the feds on Aug. 21 demanding answers. “I am very troubled by any federal rule that requires churches to apply for a permit for the purpose of baptism, especially when these traditional activities have been done in the rivers and streams of this nation since its founding,” the congressman wrote. He pointed out the National Park Service does not require a 48-hour notification from fisherman or swimmers – so why churches?...

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