

What Does It Mean to Be a Baptist? Part I

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It is evident from our very name that our church stands in a long line of churches who hold to particular Baptist distinctives. Sadly, in an age where all things are deemed to be relative, the word "Baptist" has lost much of its meaning. But Christians who go by the name "Baptist" really ought to understand something of the history of what it means to be Baptist. In an attempt to help clarify our thinking on this issue, I wish to present several articles dealing with the historic distinctives of the Baptist Church.

Sometimes we need to state the obvious! So here goes: Christians aren't churned out of the proverbial "sausage machine." In a world where, on the one hand, differences between people are clearly apparent, and, on the other, there is much pressure to either disregard these distinctives or smooth them over, many Christians wonder to themselves, "What makes us, as believers, different to the Methodists or Presbyterians (for instance)?" Unless an informed answer can be given to such legitimate questions, we can inadvertently find ourselves thinking some erroneous thoughts, and thus heading in some harmful directions. One such erroneous thought that I have heard expressed pretty often, comes in this form, "Well, we're all the same deep down, anyway." (Sometimes this sentiment is dressed up as follows: "All roads lead to Rome"; "We're all climbing the same hill, but from different directions"; "All people who call themselves Christians are essentially after the same thing.") The thinking behind such expressions is that whilst we might all be playing in different coloured jerseys, grouped into different teams, and operating according to a slightly different gameplan, at least we're all playing rugby (if you're keeping up with the metaphor!). It would be bad enough if unbelievers waved the discussion aside believing that all Christian denominations are essentially the same, but when believers themselves, through ignorance, cave in to such thinking, then we are really in trouble! So, the question, "What makes someone specifically a Baptist?" is a worthwhile question to be able to answer confidently.

Before we go ahead and answer the question, let's take a moment to do two things: Firstly, let's admit that we are not so naive as to think that everyone who worships at a Baptist church is there because the convictions they hold dear are necessarily Baptist convictions. No, we recognise that some people, maybe even many people, in any particular Baptist church are there because they just happen to have come and stayed and put down their religious and relational roots there. When they were "church shopping," XYZ Baptist church simply happened to be the closest church, or the most friendly of those that they tried out, etc. Maybe their friends/family attend and invited them to come along. Maybe they came to hear a particular preacher. Maybe they liked the music and the feel of the service. But in reality, many people who worship at a church with the name "Baptist" could

just as easily be at a church without that 7-letter word in its name.

Then secondly, let's be persuaded that the question is really worth answering. It is only when we define our terminology that we gain some insight. Why use the word "Baptist" if it has no meaning, or if we don't care about its meaning? If we insist on using it, let us at least be clear what we are intending to say by doing so. We don't simply want to sit with a mouth full of teeth when people ask us, "Why do you attend the Baptist church?" But, equally, we don't simply want to puff out our chests with bravado and own a particular name, and identify ourselves with a particular brand or franchise, in the way that some families teach their children, "My boy, never forget that you are a Kennedy! You can wear that name with your head held high." No! We want to be motivated by the knowledge that as Baptists we stand in a long line of people who have held to a certain bouquet of distinctive convictions, for which they have been prepared to shed their own blood. Let us be acutely aware that many of our Baptist forbears have literally died for insisting that they hold to certain convictions not necessarily shared by all fellow Christians! This willingness to pay a price has arisen from the persuasion that the Bible forces us into a certain mould. Baptists are amongst those who would be so brazen (some opponents would unfairly say "opinionated" or "arrogant") as to say, "If you understood the Bible the way we understand it, then you too would be a Baptist." We would like to utter such sentiments with genuine humility--we do not think we have arrived. The reality simply is that whilst we are happy to have fellowship with Christians of another stripe, we ought to be Baptists by conviction. Yes I know: in postmodern ears that phrase does not sit well. We live in an age where all "convictions" are at more accurately understood to be "temporary persuasions." The reality is, that even if you were oblivious to this fact up to this point, be well aware of it now: the word "Baptist" in our church name carries some freight; it has some weighty practical significance.

Of course, for some Christians, and even for some Baptists, the term "Baptist" causes some irritation and rankle. Maybe it would help if we gave the assurance that our purpose in even discussing the term and its meaning is with a desire precisely to cut us loose from the misunderstanding that the word "Baptist" is a denominational word. No! The term "Baptist" is first and foremost a theological designation, and for that reason we submit to every educational endeavour that will enable us to understand this word and appreciate its use.

In this first of a five-part series of articles, allow me lay out some of the angles. Let me briefly explain some of these distinctive Baptist convictions: see where you stand on the issues raised.

Baptists are a unique group of believers in that historically they alone have held, and continue to hold, to a cluster of ten defining convictions. Many other believers share some or many of these convictions with us, but only Baptists hold to all ten. In this and the following three articles, we plan to examine these convictions, and in the final article will attempt to demonstrate how these various convictions strengthen and undergird each other.

Distinctive #1: The Direct Lordship of Christ

The first and most significant Baptist conviction is that the New Testament teaches the necessity of a direct relationship with God through the person of Jesus Christ. Repeatedly Jesus is given the title "Lord." This is appropriate because He alone is our Master. We can only be reconciled to the Father, and we can only receive the Spirit, if Jesus Christ alone is trusted and embraced as our Advocate, our only Mediator, our Substitute, our elder Brother, our Friend. And this faith-relationship is a direct one. In other words, the Lordship and authority of Christ is not mediated to us, or exercised in our lives through an intermediary, such as our parents, or a human priest-figure. Between us and the Father stands one Man, Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5-6; Hebrews 9:15). Jesus Christ is the One sent by the Father to be our ultimate truth-revealing Prophet, and our ultimate self-sacrificing Priest, and our ultimate King who rules over us with justice. Baptists make no clergy-laity distinction. Together, both Pastors and non-pastors benefit from the direct Lordship of Jesus Christ as they relate to God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is because of this conviction that Baptists make much of words and phrases such as "conversion," "the new birth," "born again," etc., because without such an experience this direct relationship with God the Father through the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ is not possible!

Distinctive #2: The Priesthood of All Believers

Closely related to this conviction is the persuasion that as believers in Jesus Christ, we are all priests unto God. The New Testament images of the church, such as "the body of Christ" (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31), affirm identity of status, though differentiation of function, for all believers. The Great Commission is addressed to all believers. Paul envisages all of God's people being prepared for works of service in Ephesians 4:12. All believers are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, and so Peter can be emphatic in saying, "But you (plural!) are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellence of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light" (1 Peter 2:9). All converted sinners, whose hope for eternity is centred in Christ alone, have a certain dignity of status and a significance of function--we are all priests serving God!

Distinctive #3: Congregational Accountability

This directness of relationship and this status and significance before God lead naturally to a third conviction, namely that we all have a constructive, God-given role to play in the household of faith. Although there are traces of other forms of church government (called "polity" in theological discussion) in the New Testament, Baptists believe that the principle of congregational life emerges strongly and is most consistent with these aforementioned convictions. God has designated and equipped some to perform the role, and fill the office of elder in the congregation. This role carries with it tremendous responsibilities of authority and leadership, but such responsibilities are performed and exercised in an atmosphere of mutual submission between people who all stand before God. We see this dynamic in action in Acts 6:5-6, where the apostles initiated a strategy which was enforced by a decision taken by the whole church. So too, we see that the New Testament epistles are addressed to the whole church, not simply to its leaders. So, for example, church membership, disciple-making and discipline are all congregational affairs (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:2-5; 2 Corinthians 2:4-6). Baptists are convinced from Scripture that the local church is a "theocracy" (as opposed to a democracy on the one hand, or dictatorship on the other) in which men designated to exercise authority are held accountable to the Word by the congregation before God. (Thoughtful Baptists cringe at the suggestion that this conviction is fairly referred to by the popular ecclesiastical phrase "congregational rule." Christ rules the local congregation, by means of designated officers who are accountable to the gathered family.) So, Baptists believe that the whole congregation is responsible for determining and implementing the will of Christ.

Here then are the first three convictions which Baptists are persuaded by. Yes, we need to say it again: There are obviously other Christians who do not use the name "Baptist," but who nonetheless also hold to and live by, to a greater or lesser extent, the direct Lordship of Christ, the priesthood of all believers, and congregational accountability. But, what will become clearer as we examine further Baptist convictions in subsequent articles, is that we are unique in being persuaded about all of these interlinked convictions, as a package deal!

But what does all this mean practically? It means, that Baptists are involved people. Baptists are not passive "church-attenders," simply coming in and going out as clinically as possible. No, Baptists are thinkers, students of the Word, prepared to administer truth to each other and to unbelievers. Baptists care passionately about the local church and its witness in the community. Do you call yourself a Baptist? Then ask yourself an important question: Am I truly Baptist, or do I just happen to worship at a Baptist Church?