

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES

Galatians 5:1 (NRSV) ^{5:1} *For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

During the sixteenth century several movements sprang up in England hoping to reform the Church of England. Most called for a return to the simple teachings and practices of the Bible.

One group, the Separatists, were people who had given up hope of reforming the church from within. They were called "Separatists" because they separated from the Church of England and formed independent congregations.

The first Baptist church sprang from a Separatist congregation that formed in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire around 1606. John Smyth became its leader. Smyth and his congregation believed:

- 1) The Bible, not creeds or church tradition, should be the guide for faith and practice,
- 2) The church should be comprised only of believers, and
- 3) The church should be governed by its members and not by bishops.

The Gainsborough church grew so rapidly that the large size of the gathering made it dangerous to meet. English law forbade separate "conventicles" and congregations. The congregation divided.

Smyth continued to lead the congregation that remained at Gainsborough. Another congregation was formed at Scrooby Manor and they elected John Robinson as pastor. By 1608 both congregations had fled to Holland to escape persecution.

Smyth's congregation settled in Amsterdam. Among his congregation was Thomas Helwys. In Amsterdam the group came in contact with Dutch Mennonites who taught believer's baptism and advocated religious liberty. Smyth soon became convinced that infant baptism was invalid and that only believers (people who make a personal profession of faith in Christ) should be baptized. In 1608/09 Smyth baptized himself and then baptized the other members of his congregation.

In 1611 Thomas Helwys led a portion of Smyth's congregation back to London to advocate religious liberty and to establish the first Baptist church on English soil.

Salvation by Grace through Faith

"For by grace have you been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB) Baptists believe that God's love and grace is the only basis for any person's relationship with God. We can do nothing to earn or deserve God's love and forgiveness. Faith is not something we "work up." It is not an effort or labor. Faith is receiving God's love with an open heart and finding it transformed by God's grace.

Lordship of Christ

The heart of Baptist beliefs is the Lordship of Christ. We affirm that Christ is Lord over the individual believer, he is Lord over the church, and he is Lord over the universe and all that is in it. Jesus Christ is the final authority in our individual lives, in our homes, in our churches, and in all our relationships with society and the world. Our ultimate loyalty and allegiance is to God's Person, rather than to books, creeds, confessions, traditions, programs or procedures.

Inspiration of Scripture

The Holy Bible was written by men who were divinely inspired and is the record of God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. It reveals the principles by which God judges us; and therefore is the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.

Believer's Baptism

Baptists baptize persons only after they make a personal confession of their faith in Christ. Baptists do not believe that a loving God condemns anyone for a sin they did not commit. We do not view baptism as a remedy for original sin. We do not baptize infants.

Baptists practice baptism by totally immersing persons in water, rather than by sprinkling, pouring, or anointing persons with water. Baptism by immersion preserves the dramatic imagery of the meaning of baptism as a symbolic death, burial and resurrection. The symbolism of baptism pictures: the death, burial and resurrection of Christ who died for our sins and the believer's own death to sin, burial of a sinful nature, and resurrection to a new life in Christ.

Priesthood of All Believers and Liberty of Conscience

Baptists believe that all members are equal under God in the fellowship of the church (Gal. 3:28). Jesus is the one mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5). Every human being has direct access to God through Christ (Heb. 7:25-28). Every Christian is his or her own priest in that he or she is authorized to go directly to God for forgiveness of sins (Heb. 4:15-16) and to search the scriptures (2 Tim. 2:15) with confidence of being guided by the same Spirit (John 16:13) that inspired those who wrote the Bible (2 Peter 1:20-21). Every Christian is a priest to others in that he or she is a member of a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9) and responsible to Christ for ministering to others (1 Cor. 12:4-7).

Religious Liberty and the Separation of Church and State

George W. Truett expressed Baptist beliefs most succinctly: "Religious Liberty is the nursing mother of all liberty. Without it all other forms of liberty must soon wither and die. The Baptists grasped this conception of liberty in its full-orbed glory, from the very beginning. Their contention has been, is now, and must ever be, that it is the God-given and indefeasible right of every human being, to worship God or not, according to the dictates of his conscience; and, as long as he does not infringe on the rights of others, he is to be held accountable to God alone, for all his religious beliefs and practices."

Congregational Autonomy

Every local congregation is under the direct Lordship of Christ. We are opposed to ecclesiastical hierarchies. Our churches are not subordinate to the rule of any denomination, convention, association, fellowship or any other religious body. We believe that Christ is in and is the head of every congregation of his people (Matt. 18:20).

Our churches operate democratically because we believe every other form of church government infringes on the Lordship of Christ. Every member is responsible for seeking and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit as they participate in the deliberations and work of the church. Each member has equal right to voice their convictions and to vote according to their conscience when the congregation makes decisions. We trust the spiritual discernment of the majority and act on it. When we are at our best, we also realize that majorities can be mistaken and act with respect toward the consciences of a sometimes-prophetic minority.

Cooperative Missions

Baptists are committed to extending the good news about what God has done in Christ to the entire world. We believe that every Christian is a missionary. We believe that calls some persons to devote their lives to special ministries (1 Cor. 12:28). Recognizing that the needs of the world are great, we cooperate and partner with other Christians and churches to support vocational missionaries with our prayers, our encouragement, our labors, and our financial assistance.