

The Baptist Tradition

Reflections on Flexible Distinctives

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The Baptist movement goes back over 400 years to the early 1600s. The movement has changed in many ways over the centuries, yet there are certain things that have stayed the same. We call these things “Baptist Distinctives.” They guide but do not control, since we see God as our only Lord, and God's Word as our only authoritative guide.

One Way of Describing the Distinctives is through the Acronym: BAPTISTS

- B - Biblical Authority for faith and practice
- A - Autonomy or self-government of each Baptist church
- P - Priesthood of All Believers in Jesus Christ as a personal Saviour
- T - Two Ordinances: Believer's Baptism
The Lord's Supper

One Way of Describing the Distinctives is through the Acronym: BAPTISTS

- I - Individual Soul Liberty of the Believer
- S - Saved, Baptized Church Membership
- T - Two Offices of the local church: Pastor and Deacon
- S - Separation of Church and State

B: Biblical Authority for faith and practice

- We base our beliefs and practices on the Word of God.
- As such, we don't focus much on:
 - church traditions/history
 - new “profecies” or “revelations.”
 - contemporary philosophies, sciences, or fads.

B: Biblical Authority for faith and practice

- It also means that we are “non-creedal.” That means that we don't have a set doctrinal statement that all must agree upon.
- However, we may respect the Nicene Creed, Apostles Creed, Augsburg Confession, the Baptist Faith & Message or other doctrinal statements. But they are secondary to the Bible.

A: Autonomy (Self-Government) of the Local Church

- There is no formal hierarchy of churches. Each church is independent governmentally, controlled by no outside organization.
- Baptists have no “bishops” overseeing a group of churches. Each church is spiritually led by a pastor (or pastors) and governed by the membership.

A: Autonomy (Self-Government) of the Local Church

- Local Baptist churches may join together with other like-minded churches into fellowships, or associations, or conventions. However, doing so is voluntary, and is done for mutual support and collaboration or ministry.
- Such organizations may guide the local churches, but do not control or “own” them.

P: Priesthood of all Believers in Jesus Christ as Personal Savior.

- Each Christian (believer or follower of Christ) has access to the throne of God.
- Each Christian can pray directly to the Father through Jesus Christ. There is no need to pray to someone else or through someone else.
- The pastor/clergy in the church are to provide spiritual leadership. However, they are not closer to God than the membership and are not a source of grace or salvation.

P: Priesthood of all Believers in Jesus Christ as Personal Savior.

- In Baptist churches there is no priesthood since all Christians are seen as priests.
- Baptist churches are typically congregational... meaning that all members vote on church matters. Each member receives God's message and wisdom, not a select “prophet” or intermediary, so divine wisdom is sought from all members for church governance.

T: Two Ordinances: Lord's Supper and Believer's Baptism

- Baptists generally use the term “ordinance” rather than “sacrament.” The term “sacrament” usually implies that one receives a certain amount of tangible grace or blessing from God in doing it. Baptists, on the other hand, use the term “ordinance” meaning it is something we are supposed to do... however, we do it symbolically (because of the meaning behind the action) rather than sacramentally.

T: Two Ordinances: Lord's Supper and Believer's Baptism

- Baptists hold to two ordinances because the early church had two major symbolic rites... these being the Lord's Supper and Baptism.
- Catholics have 7 sacraments, but the other five are part of later church tradition, not the New Testament Church. Our authority is the Bible, not later church history, so we don't reject other rituals, but we don't accept them as having special mandate.

T: Two Ordinances: Lord's Supper and Believer's Baptism

- Some Protestant Groups add other rites. Some consider foot washing as an ordinance or sacrament. Some require Old Testament practices to be carried out by the church. These may not be bad, but Baptists see these as not required based on the words of Christ and the apostles, and the practice of the early church.

T: Two Ordinances: Lord's Supper and Believer's Baptism

- The Lord's Supper (“Eucharist”) is commanded by Christ to be carried out as a symbol. It is something we do **NOW** (as often as we eat this bread and drink this wine), looking into the **PAST** (we proclaim the Lord's death), and into the **FUTURE** (until He comes). It is a symbol of faith, unity, remembrance and hope.
- It does not save. We do it in response to the faith in us and God's love for us.

T: Two Ordinances: Lord's Supper and Believer's Baptism

- Baptism is also a symbol. It does not save, nor bestow grace.
- It is for believers since it demonstrates the faith of the individual. Infant baptism may demonstrate the faith of the parents, but certainly not the faith of the baby.
- Baptists immerse in water rather than sprinkle or wash. This is consistent with the practice of the early church.

T: Two Ordinances: Lord's Supper and Believer's Baptism

- Baptism symbolizes dying with Christ and being “born again” as a new creation in Christ. Most Baptists will require baptism to be a member of the church.
- Some groups describe a separate baptism called “spirit baptism.” However, most Baptists see the Holy Spirit indwelling all believers, not just some, and that being baptized of the Holy Spirit (based on I Cor. 12) describes the unity of all believers.

I: Individual Soul Liberty (and Responsibility) of the Believer

- Each individual has the right, ability, and responsibility to make a personal choice to follow God or not.
- No one else can make the decision for another. (God has spiritual children... no spiritual grandchildren).
- Salvation is a free gift of God in which we may accept with our heart or reject.

I: Individual Soul Liberty (and Responsibility) of the Believer

- Related to this idea is that our allegiance, ultimately, is to God.
- We don't owe ultimate allegiance to pope, pastor, church, or denomination.
- We may honor those in spiritual leadership over us, but our allegiance to God must always come before other allegiances. As Peter and John said, “We must obey God, rather than men.” (Acts 5:29)

S: Saved Church Membership

- Members of a Baptist church are saved (at least by public testimony), and have gone through Believer's Baptism.
- The “church family” may include non-members--entire families, regular visitors to the church, and more--but members are more narrowly defined.
- No one can be born a member of a Baptist church, since no one is born already a Christian.

S: Saved Church Membership

- Members can vote on church matters, and hold certain offices in the church.
- Some churches say that only members can serve in the church. Some only allow members to partake of the Lord's Supper (closed communion) while others allow all Christians (open communion).
- Membership does not save a person and not being a member does not mean one is unsaved. (God judges the heart, not man.)

T: Two Offices: Pastor and Deacon

- The early church had two major offices that were part of church governance.
- One we call “pastor” but was sometimes called presbyter, overseer, bishop, elder, and so forth.
- Some feel that there should only be one pastor per church, while others feel there can be several, one of which may be described as being “senior pastor.”

T: Two Offices: Pastor and Deacon

- Pastors are spiritual leaders. They guide and train. They are not kings, lords, or captains. They encourage and exhort, not command.
- Deacons are ministerial leaders. They lead various ministry activities in the church.
- Both are to be spiritually mature, godly, and of good reputation.

T: Two Offices: Pastor and Deacon

- Some Baptists feel that the role of pastor and/or deacon is limited to men. Others feel they are open to both men and women.
- Baptist churches can have other offices (Sunday school teachers, treasurer, worship leader, etc.). However, these are seen as roles set up based on need, not offices established by God.

T: Two Offices: Pastor and Deacon

- Baptists usually don't use the title “bishop”. In the New Testament, a “bishop” was simply a pastor. However, in later church history it described a person who was above other pastors and churches.
- Baptists don't use the title “apostle.” In the New Testament, an apostle was a church planter. However, the title has been greatly misused in more recent years by some groups, so Baptists avoid it.

S: Separation of Church and State

- Historically, there was the assumption that the local government defined what religion its citizens would be allowed to practice.
- Even with the Protestant Reformation (and the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648) freedom of religion commonly meant freedom of the government to choose a religion, rather than the freedom of individual faith.
- Baptists are from groups that rejected state-run, state-determined, religion.

S: Separation of Church and State

- Separation does not necessarily mean that Baptists can't impact government or be involved in policy matters. Nor does it mean government must be fully secular.
- Separation means that the church and the individual has religious freedom, free from governmental control.
- It also means that religious groups should not seek to take over a government, nor impose its religious beliefs on others.

Reviewing

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Note

These distinctives are quite flexible in practice. Because of this, Baptists have been able to adapt to different cultures in different places and different times.

In fact, the distinctives simply provide guidelines of our tradition based on our understanding of God's Word. But God and His revelation are our only true guides for our faith and conduct.

Baptists join in spiritual unity with others who share faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ.

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