

Baptist Distinctives

Primacy of Scripture: This conviction is not unique to Baptists but is true of all genuine Christian churches and it is upon this foundation that all the other Baptist distinctives are built. Baptists have historically held that the Scriptures, consisting of the 66 Books of the Old and New Testaments, are the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured.

Priesthood of all believers and freedom of conscience: Baptists have historically believed that every believer has access to God through Christ, rather than being dependent on professional clergy to mediate for them. God's grace and forgiveness come directly to each believer. Each one may approach God directly through Christ and function in a priestly manner, offering prayers, worship and intercession on behalf of others.

Baptists have also believed in the freedom of conscience. God alone is Lord of the conscience; God alone has absolute, unquestionable authority. Even legitimate human authorities have limited, derived authority and so absolute allegiance must only be given to God. This means that no human command can be obeyed if it is in conflict with God's commands. The requiring of an implicit faith or an absolute and blind obedience to any human authority destroys this Christian liberty. Liberty of conscience should in no way be confused with an unrestrained license to disregard the duties required from us according to God's Word *including* the submission to human authorities acting within their delegated sphere.

True believers only in the church: Baptists have historically believed that local church membership should be made up of confessing believers who are committed to that local church. Church members are those who voluntarily hold to the covenant that church has with God.

Two ordinances: Baptists have historically believed that there are only two ordinances established by the Lord; Believers Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and that these acts are mainly ways of expressing our personal faith in Christ. Baptists do believe that the Holy Spirit operates in a special way when we faithfully and obediently practice the two ordinances given to us by Christ.

Believer's Baptism: Baptists have historically believed that believers are saved, not by the act of baptism (Acts 8:13, 23; Heb. 6:4-6) but by what baptism symbolizes, Christ's death and resurrection. The symbol and the reality are so closely related, however, that the symbol is sometimes used to refer to the reality (Romans 6:3-4; Acts 2:38). Baptists believe that only believers should be baptized. The active faith of a baptismal candidate should precede the ordinance itself and so infant baptism is not an option. Baptists have also held that immersion is the proper mode of baptism. The terms "baptize" and "baptism" are transliterations from the Greek term *baptizo*, meaning, "to dip," "to immerse," or "to surround with." Also, baptism by immersion most closely symbolizes the meaning of the act.

Autonomy & associations of local congregations: Baptists have historically believed that the lordship of Christ over his church is directly present in each local body without the need for any governing body outside the local church. Even as each believer is considered a "priest" each local church is able to seek the will and mind of Christ for its own affairs.

It is important, however, to balance this autonomy with the unity and interdependence of the Kingdom. Many Baptist churches have formed voluntary associations that provide advice, some accountability, encouragement and added effectiveness in carrying out our mandate in the larger community.

Separation of church and state: Baptists have historically believed that neither the church nor the state, as institutions, should control the other. This “separation” says that civil government has no right to use force in matters of the religious beliefs of its citizens (unless genuine injury results from the exercise of such beliefs). No government has the right to meddle in the internal affairs of the church or determine the nature of the church's message. Likewise, civil power may not be used as a means to dictate to the nation as a whole any purely religious policy. This is not intended to eliminate religion from national life nor is it intended to silence the voice of the church in matters of civil concern. The issue boils down to the right use of the ‘sword’. The sword is *not* a tool given to the church to fulfill its mission. The state *has* been given the sword as a tool but its mission or purpose is justice not salvation. The state has been commissioned to judge a person according to what they do. The church, with God’s word, brings judgment to the heart of a person and then points them to Jesus. Much harm has come historically from the confusion of these roles.