

Who Are Baptists, Anyway?

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Who are Baptists, anyway? A very appropriate question, but one not easily answered. Worldwide, the name identifies over 43 million Christians, 165,000 churches, and 200 denominational groups. They are a loosely-knit, diverse global family of believers who share with all Christians a common confession that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord. Unlike many Christian groups, they have no standardized norm of belief, practice or structure. Like most families, they often disagree with each other.

One way to identify Baptists is to look at their history. The birth year for the movement was 1609. It emerged out of English Puritan Separatism as a nameless movement, similar in theology to earlier evangelical reforming groups. Passionately devoted to religious freedom for all, they opted for believer's baptism, regenerate church membership, local church autonomy, congregational polity, and church-state separation. During their first two hundred years of existence they formed voluntary associations, adopted moderately Calvinistic confessions of faith, endured persecution, experienced strong initial growth followed by a period of spiritual lethargy, and finally witnessed a phenomenal revival in the late 18th century. Two of their greatest legacies to the modern era of history occurred during this period: (1) their persistent advocacy of religious liberty influenced the adoption of the American constitutional principle of separation of church and state and (2) their birthing and launching of the modern evangelical missionary movement. The movement also became a denomination clearly identified by the name Baptist. In addition to continued growth, the past two centuries have been characterized by global expansion and cooperative efforts to develop organizational structures for doing ministry in such areas as missions, evangelism and education and in addressing social and ethical issues.

Another way to identify Baptists is to look at their shared beliefs. For example, the Baptist Distinctives Committee of the Baptist General Convention of Texas has compiled a list of distinctives which includes the following: (1) The authority of the Bible, (2) Believer's baptism and church membership, (3) Congregational church government, (4) Evangelism and missions, (5) Salvation only by grace through faith, (6) Soul competency and the priesthood of the believer, (7) Baptism and the Lord's Supper, (8) The autonomy of the local congregation, (9) The deity and Lordship of Christ, (10) The security of the believer, (11) Voluntary cooperation among churches, and (12) Religious freedom and separation of church and state.

Taken collectively, this list represents a consensus of beliefs for a significant majority of Baptists. Though helpful, the genius of Baptist identity does not reside in a catalogue of beliefs. Rather it is found in an intangible inner dynamic or persona that spiritually incorporates and integrates these commonly held beliefs into a vibrant witnessing family for Christ. That family may truly be called Baptist. Therein, lies the answer to the question, Who are Baptists, anyway?

They are a People of Faith comprised of persons of all nationalities who have freely chosen to be members of this remarkable family dedicated to the preservation, perpetuation, and dissemination of these core biblical truths.

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