



BAPTISTS

WHO? WHERE? WHAT? WHY?

“Yea,
I have a
goodly
heritage”
Psalm 16:6

Baptists number in the millions worldwide and frequently make news. Yet little is known about Baptists by the world in general and what is known is often misunderstood. Even some Baptists are not familiar with Baptist beliefs and practices, heritage and history.

Did you know that...

- ...a Baptist pastor established the first form of governance in America that provided complete religious freedom for all
- ...the first Baptist missionaries from America were not Baptists when they set sail for the mission field in 1812 but became Baptists on the way
- ...an early Baptist pastor in England was imprisoned by King James I (of King James Bible fame) for insisting that all persons should have freedom to worship
- ...the first elected president of the Republic of Texas became an outstanding Texas Baptist layman
- ...one of the first Baptist preachers to go from the United States to another country was an African-American who had been a slave
- ...a Baptist pastor from Texas preached a sermon on religious liberty from the steps of the United States Capitol in Washington DC
- ...a Baptist pastor in Virginia met with James Madison to encourage an amendment to the Constitution of the United States guaranteeing freedom of religion
- ...the best known, world renowned evangelist, a Baptist, began his ministry in the mid-twentieth century
- ...the first person baptized in the Gulf of Mexico as a Baptist, when Texas was still an independent nation, founded a major milk company
- ...a former president of the United States of America, a Baptist layman Sunday School teacher, received the Nobel Peace Prize
- ...a generous Baptist businessman was the first to develop an effective process for pasteurizing cheese
- ...the author of the widely used devotional book *My Utmost for His Highest* was from a devout Baptist family, his father and brother being Baptist pastors

See back for answers



Baptists defy simple descriptions. They do not fit into neat categories. Diverse in many ways, Baptists are defined, not by a single doctrine, but by a group of beliefs and practices. Taken as a whole, these make Baptists a distinct fellowship of Christians. Materials abound concerning Baptists. This leaflet offers only a brief overview.

Who are Baptists?

Baptists are a diverse people.

Racially, Baptists are—“red, yellow, brown, black, and white.” Once predominantly white, Baptists are now a virtual kaleidoscope of human hues.

Economically, Baptists vary from paupers to billionaires. They live in hovels and mansions. They exist on welfare checks and thrive as entrepreneurs.

Politically, Baptists cover practically the entire spectrum. In some countries Baptists serve in a variety of government positions while Baptists in other countries endure severe government persecution.

Educationally, Baptists range from illiterate people to brilliant scholars. Baptists include those who have no formal schooling and also those who have climbed to the highest rung of the academic ladder.

Religiously, Baptist congregations worship formally and informally. They are found in groups described as both conservative and liberal.

Culturally, Baptists vary greatly. They differ in diet, apparel, and customs. Neither mode of clothing nor style of hair identifies a Baptist. Baptists speak numerous languages and dialects.

Where Are Baptists Found?

Baptists can be found throughout the world. Baptists live, worship, and minister in more than a hundred countries. The Baptist World Alliance maintains as complete a record as exists, but exact statistics on Baptists are difficult to determine. It is estimated that approximately 50 million baptized believers are members of Baptist churches worldwide. Millions more who are not members participate in and benefit from these churches.

The largest concentration of Baptists is in North America where an estimated number of 35 to 40 million Baptists live. The second-largest concentration of Baptists is found in Africa, where approximately 7 million Baptists reside. The third-largest group of Baptists lives in Asia, with over 4.5 million members. The fourth-most-sizeable Baptist population is found in South America, with more than 1.5 million members. Baptists exist in smaller but nonetheless meaningful populations in the Caribbean Islands, Central America, the Middle East, and Europe.

“Every Baptist ought to know why he is a Baptist, and to know it from the specific commands of God’s Word. Not to have such knowledge is for our churches to be harmed in every way.”

George W. Truett, pastor,
First Baptist Church of Dallas, 1897-1944

The Baptist denomination is growing worldwide. The fastest-growing population is in Africa, and the second is in Asia. The slowest growth is taking place in Europe and North America, where the Baptist increase was once the greatest.

What are the Contributions of Baptists?

Baptists are not perfect. However, Baptists have made and continue to make many meaningful contributions. Practically every aspect of human life has benefited from these contributions.

Through evangelism and missions, God has used Baptists to help transform the lives of millions of people as they have come to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Baptists minister to a plethora of human hurt—physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual. Baptist hospitals and clinics, child and elder care organizations, disaster-relief groups, counseling centers, and numerous other entities bind up broken bodies and spirits, restore shattered lives, and contribute to the overall well-being of people of all ages, races, and conditions.

Baptists apply the gospel of Christ in various ways to attack ills of society, such as poverty, racism, injustice, crime, hunger, corruption, abuse of women and children, drug addiction, and sexual perversion.

Baptists provide numerous educational opportunities to a massive number of people. By furnishing a vast number of books, periodicals, and Internet resources, Baptists enable individuals to garner knowledge. By fostering schools, universities, and seminaries, Baptists make available formal academic studies.

Perhaps the most distinctive Baptist contribution has been that of religious liberty and its corollary, the separation of church and state. Historians, both secular and religious, recognize Baptists as leaders in the struggle for religious freedom, a struggle that continues.

Why Do Baptists Function as They Do?

Why have **Baptists grown from a handful of people,** hounded and persecuted by both religious organizations and governments, **to one of the largest denominations in the world?** Why have Baptists sacrificed comfort, possessions, and even life itself to minister to others and to work for religious freedom for all?

Although no simple answer exists to questions such as these, **the why of Baptist action is rooted in basic Baptist beliefs.** Baptists are a vastly diverse people. Nevertheless, they hold certain basic doctrines and practices in common.



No single doctrine or polity defines Baptists, but taken as a whole, they make Baptists a distinctive denomination. Some of these convictions, such as a belief in God, are held by all Christians. Others, such as belief in congregational governance, are held in common with certain denominations. However, the entire combination of beliefs, polities, and practices held by Baptists makes them a unique fellowship of Christians. Baptists may not all agree on the exact meaning of *some* of these, but practically all Baptists embrace *all* of them.

Basic doctrines include these: The Lordship of Jesus Christ, the Bible as the sole written authority for faith and practice, soul competency, salvation only by a voluntary response of repentance and faith to God's grace through the gift of his Son, the priesthood of all believers, baptism only of believers and only by immersion, and a regenerate (born again) voluntary church membership.

Basic Baptist polities include these: Congregational church governance, the autonomy of Baptist churches and other Baptist entities, baptism and the Lord's Supper as symbolic, financial support by the voluntary contribution of tithes and offerings (not by taxes), and worship styles freely chosen under the Lordship of Christ.

Basic Baptist practices and emphases include these: Evangelism, missions, ministry, the application of the gospel to all of life, and Christian education.

Baptist commitment to religious freedom undergirds all of these. Voluntarism, never coercion, permeates these convictions. Thus Baptists contend for a free church in a free state.

Conclusion

The Baptist story is colorful and exciting, filled with victory and defeat, sacrifice and success, agreement and dispute. Baptists differ in many ways, but they generally concur on basic beliefs and practices. **As long as Baptists remain true to these core convictions, they will not only endure but also will thrive.**

For further information, see www.baptistdistinctives.org

{Answers to "Did you know?": Roger Williams; Ann Hasseltine and Adoniram Judson; Thomas Helwys; Sam Houston; George Liele; George W. Truett; John Leland; Billy Graham; Gail Borden, Jr.; Jimmy Carter; James L. Kraft; Oswald Chambers.}

The basic material in this leaflet originally appeared in a series of articles in the Baptist Standard in 2005. Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund to provide for publishing the series. He asked William M. Pinson, Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles. The financial assistance of The Prichard Family Foundation and Vester T. Hughes, Jr. enabled this series of nineteen leaflets to be produced based on the articles. Skyler Tinker designed and formatted the leaflets for publication.
Each leaflet is for both individual and group study.

The topics in this series: (1) Baptists: Who? Where What? Why? (2) What Makes a Baptist a Baptist? (3) The Lordship of Christ; (4) The Bible as Authority for Faith and Practice; (5) Soul Competency; (6) Salvation Only By Grace Through Faith; (7) The Priesthood of All Believers; (8) Believer's Baptism; (9) A Regenerate Church Membership; (10) Congregational Church Governance; (11) Church Autonomy; (12) Baptist Church Life: Organization, Worship, Officers, Ordinances; (13) Voluntary Cooperation; (14) Evangelism; (15) Missions; (16) Ministry; (17) Christian Education; (18) The Application of the Gospel; (19) Religious Freedom.

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