

Baptist Church Life:

Organization

Officers

Worship

Ordinances



Freedom and variety, among other things, characterize the life of Baptist churches. With the Bible as their guide Baptist churches are autonomous. Each is governed under the Lordship of Christ by the members of the church. Baptist churches, while holding major beliefs in common, differ in various ways in the life of the churches. **This variety is true in regard to organization, worship, officers, and ordinances.**

Church Organization

No entity outside of the church dictates organizational structure to a Baptist church. The organization of a Baptist church is based on congregational governance. Furthermore, although the Bible contains teachings about the nature, purpose, officers, and ordinances of a church, it has little specific instruction on organization. Thus the church members have a great deal of freedom in how they organize a church as long as the basic New Testament purposes of a church are fulfilled, such as worship, evangelism, Christian nurture, and fellowship.

For Baptists the organizational structure of churches has varied from time to time and place to place. For example, Baptist churches in the early years in America did not have Sunday Schools. When the Sunday School movement developed, the organization of churches was adjusted to provide Bible teaching for all ages.

The size of the church plays a factor in organization. Some churches, especially those with few members, do not have a complex organizational structure. On the other hand, churches with many members have complex structures with various committees, numerous organizations for Christian education and missions, and sizeable staff.

Worship

Just as no outside human authority can dictate to a Baptist church its organization none can dictate matters about worship. Congregational worship is an essential part of every Baptist church but **worship services vary** greatly in ways such as structure, leadership, style, length, and place. Each congregation freely determines its own pattern. There is no prescribed denominational form of worship.

“That Baptists are a ‘free church people’ finds expression in the wide variety of worship practices in their churches...”

William R. Estep

Why Baptists? A Study of Baptist Faith and Heritage

Generally, Baptist worship includes reading from the Bible, praying, singing, collecting tithes and offerings, and preaching but even these vary from church to church. In some churches congregational worship is very structured and formal and in others it is very unstructured and informal.



The biblical teachings about the priesthood of believers (1 Peter 2:5; Revelation 1:6; 5:10), soul competency (Joshua 24:15; John 3:16; Acts 5:17-42), and local church autonomy (Acts 6:1-6; 13:1-3; 2 Corinthians 8:1-8) undergird the Baptist conviction that each church under the Lordship of Christ ought to be free to determine the place, elements, and leaders for worship.

Religious freedom (Acts 4:18-20; 5:27-29; Galatians 5:1) shines brightly in the Baptist concept of worship. In order to be genuine, worship must be free, never coerced. Churches ought to be free to decide the content of a worship service. Because of Baptists' deep commitment to the leadership of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:18), such freedom ought not to result in confusion, but rather things should be done "in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Corinthians 14:40 NIV).

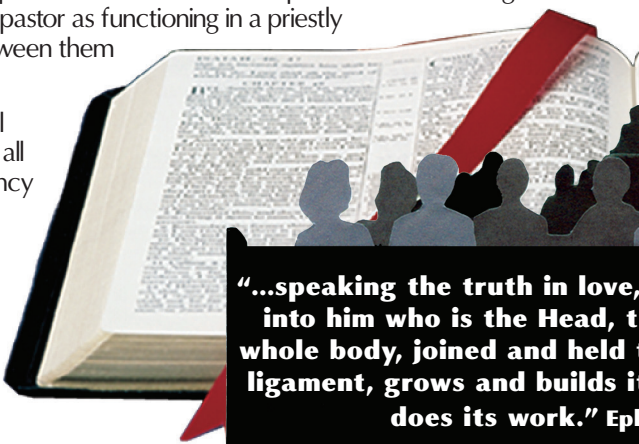
Church Officers

Hershel Hobbs, a respected pastor/theologian, wrote in *The Baptist Faith and Message*, "**The officers in a local New Testament church are pastors and deacons (Phil. 1:1).**" In reference to pastors, Hobbs added, "The same office is variously called bishop, elder, or pastor." In the Greek language, the language in which the New Testament was originally written, these three words indicate different functions and not different persons (Acts 20:17-28; Titus 1:7-9; 1 Peter 5:1-5). Baptist churches have used various titles for persons in pastoral leadership. At one time "elder" was commonly used and today it is usually "pastor."

Baptists believe in congregational church governance and the autonomy of churches. Therefore, **pastors are not appointed by some entity outside of the local congregation.** Each congregation is responsible for the selection of its pastor and deacons. While seeking to follow biblical qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9) **Baptist churches differ in certain requirements that they have for a pastor;** for example, some require a seminary degree while others have no educational requirement.

Governance is in the hands of the church as a whole, not the pastor or deacons. A pastor, according to the Bible, is to exercise strong leadership, not dictatorship (1 Peter 5:1-5). The Bible teaches that all persons who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are priests with direct access to God (1 Peter 2:5; Revelation 1:6; 5:10). **Therefore, there is no need for a special priestly class (Hebrews 8–10).** Thus, Baptists do not use the term "priest" when referring to the pastor nor consider the pastor as functioning in a priestly fashion, such as mediating between them and God.

Baptists believe that the biblical concepts of the priesthood of all believers and of soul competency do not undermine **the important role of the pastor.** While all "believer priests" are equal, some are called by God and selected by the church members to be "pastor leaders." Believers are



"...speaking the truth in love, into him who is the Head, the whole body, joined and held together by ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." Eph 4:15-16

not to abdicate to pastors their responsibility to study and interpret the Bible and to seek Christ's will and to follow him as Lord of life.

Ordination is practiced by most Baptist churches for pastors and deacons and is considered valid for a lifetime. For Baptists, ordination is a function of an individual church, not that of the denomination. **Baptists do not believe that ordination endows a person with any special powers or authority.** It is a means of indicating that a person meets the biblical qualifications to serve as a pastor or deacon. In recent years, Baptists have extended ordination to include other persons in ministry, such as chaplains, missionaries, and church staff members.

Church Ordinances

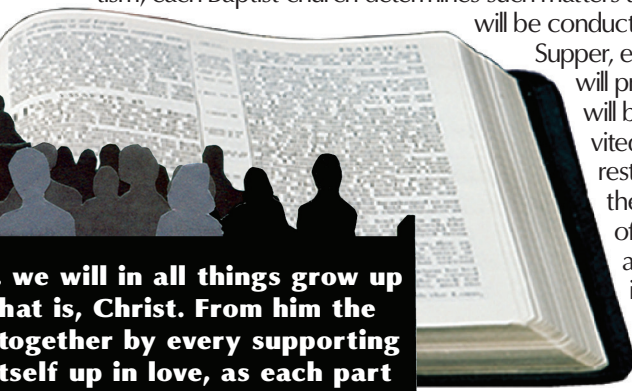
Baptist churches celebrate two ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper, basing their beliefs about these on the teachings of Jesus. They often use the word "ordinances" in referring to them because they were ordered or commanded by Jesus himself (Matthew 28:19; Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25).

The Bible records that the New Testament churches practiced both baptism and the Lord's Supper, in that order and as symbolic. Baptism took place one time for a person after she or he had believed in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; the Lord's Supper, on the other hand, was taken periodically throughout the life of the believer. Baptists believe that this same pattern should be followed today. Salvation is by God's grace through faith in Christ alone, not by works or ritual (Ephesians 2:8-9). **Therefore, Baptists contend that baptism and the Lord's Supper, while very significant, are not necessary for salvation.**

Because the Bible indicates that all believers in Christ are priests, **there is no need for a priestly class to administer either baptism or the Lord's Supper.** Although normally the pastor of a church baptizes and presides at the Lord's Supper, any member designated by the church could do so. In the Lord's Supper, every believer priest, and not just the one presiding, partakes of the bread and the cup.

Congregational governance and church autonomy under the Lordship of Christ relate to the two ordinances. Concerning baptism, each Baptist church determines such matters as when and where baptisms will be conducted. Concerning the Lord's

Supper, each congregation decides who will preside, how often the Supper will be offered, and who will be invited to participate. Some churches restrict the Supper to members of the church, many invite members of other churches of "like faith and order" to participate, some include all baptized believers, and a few open the Supper to all who profess faith in Christ as Lord and Savior.



we will in all things grow up that is, Christ. From him the together by every supporting itself up in love, as each part
Ephesians 4:15-16 (NIV)



Because baptism and the Lord's Supper are symbolic, the use of the proper symbols is important. Baptism symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus that has made possible our salvation. Baptism also symbolizes that a person through faith in Christ has passed from death to life and that this person has identified with Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:12). **Only the total immersion of a person in water adequately symbolizes this death, burial, and resurrection.**

Likewise, using the correct elements in the Lord's Supper with a biblical understanding of them is important. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper at his last meal with his disciples before his death as part of the Jewish Passover (Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:14-20). Unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine were part of the meal. Jesus indicated that the bread was symbolic of his body and the fruit of the vine symbolic of his blood.

Baptists believe that the elements used in the Supper are not literally the body and blood of Christ but are symbols of his body and blood. In partaking of the bread and the cup, Christ's disciples are to remember his sacrifice on the cross of Calvary as he gave his body and shed his blood for our sins. The Lord's Supper is an opportunity to obey a command of Christ and to recall his sacrifice for us, his presence with us, and his certain return (1 Corinthians 11:24-28).



Believing that the Lord's Supper and baptism are symbolic does not mean that Baptists consider them inconsequential. Both of these are of great significance because of their divine origin. They are not human creations but given by God to assist us in sharing the gospel (1 Corinthians 11:26) and motivating us to live the Christian life (1 Corinthians 10:16-33).

Conclusion

Baptist churches are diverse, but they have in common a commitment to basic biblical beliefs. **Although they vary in a number of ways, they are alike in many ways, such as in commitment to the Lordship of Christ and the authority of the Bible.**

For further information, see www.baptistdistinctives.org

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 G. 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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