

BAPTISTS



"...Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..." 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)

WHAT MAKES A BAPTIST A BAPTIST?

"I just believe in being a Christian—I don't want to be part of a denomination."

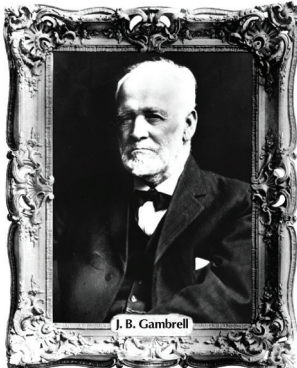
A statement such as this seems very pious, but it makes it sound like there is something wrong with being part of a denomination of Christians.

What Is a "Denomination"?

Sometimes people do not distinguish between a "denomination" and a "religious organization." "Denomination" describes a set of beliefs and practices held in common by a group of persons. Denominations usually develop various organizations to help fulfill the values and beliefs of the denomination, but the organizations are not the denomination, they are just an expression of it. For example, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Baptist World Alliance are not separate denominations; they are organizations within the Baptist denomination.

Although some people feel that it would be ideal if all Christians held exactly the same beliefs and followed the same practices, that is not the way it is--and never has been. From the beginning of the Christian movement, various opinions have existed about different matters such as the nature of the church, the way of salvation, and the meaning of baptism. Becoming a Christian is, of course, primary. But convictions about these matters determine which Christian denomination a person belongs to.

Denominations are a fact. They exist and they are not vanishing. Some, such as the Baptist denomination, are growing throughout the world. And denominations are important. They make a big difference in the lives of persons and in the world. The denomination a person is part of certainly has an impact on that person's life. So it is important to know what denominations believe and practice.



"As Baptist principles are peculiar to Baptists, every Baptist church, with all its appointments, from preacher to Sunday-school teacher, ought to stand, in the community where it holds forth the word, for something different from any other congregation."

J. B. Gambrell (b. 1841- d. 1921)
Baptist pastor, university president, editor, seminary professor, denominational leader/statesman



What Makes Baptists Distinctive?

If someone were to ask you, “What is the one thing that makes the Baptist denomination different from other Christian denominations?” what would you say? Is it baptism by immersion of persons who have believed in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Is it a strong commitment to the concept of the priesthood of the believer? Is it an enduring belief in religious freedom?

Each of these is certainly held by Baptist Christians. But Christians of certain other denominations also hold them, although in some cases with a bit of a different interpretation.

The fact is that **there is no single belief or practice that makes Baptists distinctive from other Christians.** So what makes a Baptist a Baptist?

A combination of beliefs and practices sets Baptists apart from other Christian groups. There is a distinctive group of doctrines and polities for Baptists, a sort of Baptist recipe. Like most recipes, each of the ingredients is not unique to Baptists, but the total mix is distinctively Baptist.

Baptists come in a variety of “flavors.” They hold different interpretations and views on certain issues, such as the Second Coming of Christ, worship styles, and denominational organization. However, certain ingredients must be included, or the recipe does not produce a Baptist. Leave the cornmeal out of cornbread and substitute white flour, and you do not get cornbread. Similarly, leave out a key ingredient of the Baptist recipe, and you do not get a Baptist.

The Baptist

What are these key ingredients in the Baptist recipe? Some of them Baptists have in common with Christians of most all denominations, such as belief in God and in Jesus Christ as Savior. However, Baptist beliefs about some major matters differ from those held by certain other groups. For example, although practically all Christian groups declare that baptism is significant for Christians, Baptists hold a different view of baptism than most. The Baptist denomination has no human founder as some others do, but rather has developed out of a commitment to biblical teachings as Baptists interpret them.

The Baptist recipe includes several key beliefs or doctrines:

- the Lordship of Jesus Christ
- the Bible as the sole written authority for faith and practice
- soul competency
- salvation from sin and eternal death to forgiveness and eternal life only by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior who is the grace gift of God
- the priesthood of each believer and of all believers in Christ
- believer's baptism by immersion
- baptism and the Lord's Supper as wonderfully symbolic but not essential for salvation
- church membership only for persons who have been born again
- religious freedom and its corollary, the separation of church and state

Why Is There a Lack of Knowledge About Baptists?

Why do many Baptists today lack understanding of what it means to be a Baptist? **Several factors likely have contributed to this lack of knowledge:**

ist Recipe

Built upon the foundation of these beliefs are certain practices or polities that are part of the Baptist recipe:

- congregational church governance under the Lordship of Christ
- the autonomy of churches
- voluntary cooperation for various causes

Closely related to these beliefs and practices are a number of emphases which characterize most Baptists:

- evangelism
- missions
- Christian education
- ministry
- social concern

In order to carry these out, Baptists have organized in various ways beyond local congregations, such as associations of churches, societies, conventions, fellowships, unions, and alliances. Baptists have also established numerous institutions such as those for education, missions, and the care of children, the aged, and the ill. *The common ingredient in all of these is voluntary cooperation.*

Baptists endeavor to base each belief, practice, emphasis, and organization on the teachings of the Bible. The desire of Baptists is to be as close to the New Testament model for an individual Christian and for a church that is humanly possible with God's help through the instruction and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

BYPU, BTU, Training Union, and Church Training held on Sunday evenings in churches (the name differed in different eras of Baptist life, but the aim of each was to "make disciples") emphasized Baptist doctrine, practice, and history, but they no longer exist.

A multitude of people have joined Baptist churches in recent years from other denominations, and others have come with little or no church background. In both cases, their knowledge of Baptist beliefs and practices is usually limited.

Some Baptist churches provide little or no help for members to understand what it means to be a Baptist Christian and a Baptist church.

Some persons believe that denominations are either a thing of the past or of little importance.

The Growing Interest in Baptist Beliefs

Such a decline in understanding of who Baptists really are, both among Baptists and non-Baptists, has **ignited a renewed interest in the beliefs, practices, and heritage of our Baptist family of Christians.**

Baptists of the past held steadfastly to those beliefs and practices that made them a distinct denomination. They did so, not

because they wanted to be distinct, but because they were convinced that they were true to God's Word.

They endured fierce opposition from governments and other Christian groups. They suffered ridicule, fines, public floggings, imprisonment, and death for their refusal to abandon their convictions based on the Bible. Surely we ought to take seriously and pass to succeeding generations the biblically based faith that they paid such a high price to preserve.

More and more persons heed the words of George W. Truett, **“Every Baptist ought to know why he is a Baptist, and to know it from the specific commands of God’s Word.”**

Centers for sharing Baptist beliefs have been established. Baptist schools offer courses on Baptist identity. Increasing numbers of churches provide conferences on Baptist beliefs. Books and other materials on Baptist beliefs and heritage are being produced. More and more pastors preach sermons on Baptist distinctives.

What Difference Does It Make?

What difference does a person’s denomination make? It makes a lot of difference. There are wonderfully dedicated Christians in various denominations, but there are distinctive beliefs which we hold dear as Baptists that are compelling reasons to be part of the Baptist denomination.

Does the Baptist denomination matter? Yes, most definitely! The Baptist denomination has made and continues to make a difference in the world. For example, we are free to worship in our country due in large measure to the sacrificial and unselfish efforts of persons who were part of the Baptist denomination that championed religious freedom. Furthermore, millions of persons have benefited from Baptist evangelism, ministry, education, and benevolence.

Conclusion

This series of leaflets explores each of the beliefs, practices, emphases, and organizational approaches that make up the Baptist recipe. In addition, each leaflet directs persons to a website where more information on each topic can be found.

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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