

# IS SOUL COMPETENCY THE BAPTIST DISTINCTIVE?



“Choose you this day whom ye will serve.”  
Joshua 24:15

**Is soul competency the primary Baptist distinctive?** Some outstanding Baptist leaders, past and present, seem to indicate that it may be.

“The concept of the soul’s competency is more than a single doctrine; actually, it undergirds all the other doctrines of the faith.”

H. Leon McBeth (b. 1931)  
Baptist educator/historian

“Out of this principle flow all other elements of Baptist belief....”

Herschel H. Hobbs (b. 1907 - d. 1995)  
Baptist pastor/theologian

## The Meaning of Soul Competency

**What does “soul competency” mean?** Various terms have been used for this concept, such as soul freedom, freedom of conscience, and soul competency. Basically it means the God-given freedom and ability of persons to know and respond to God’s will. Baptists believe that God gives people competency—that is ability—to make choices. Human beings are not puppets or machines.

**Baptists emphasize that this ability is not a mere human characteristic, but a gift from God.** In creation, God gave to persons the freedom to make choices. The Genesis account of creation makes crystal clear that this freedom carried with it awesome responsibility. We are responsible for our choices. God sets forth the consequences of good and bad decisions. If we exercise our freedom in order to obey him, we have life. If we use our freedom to deny him, the result is death (Genesis 1–2).

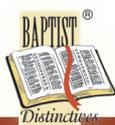
## The Bible and Soul Competency

**The Bible is filled with examples of soul competency.** The Bible considers it a fact that people have freedom of choice. The Bible also teaches that people are accountable to God for their choices.

For example, God’s gift of the Ten Commandments assumed the competency of human beings to understand them and the freedom to accept or to reject them. With acceptance came blessing, and with rejection came punishment. In any case, competency and freedom of choice were assumed (Exodus 20:1-17).

“...the principle of the competency of the soul in religion under God is a distinctive Baptist contribution to the world’s thought....”

Edgar Young Mullins (b. 1860 - d. 1928)  
Baptist educator/theologian



The people of Israel were given choices, indicating a competency to make decisions. Joshua declared, "Choose you this day whom ye will serve" (Joshua 24:15). This challenge would have been meaningless if the people had no competency or freedom to choose.

The heroes of the faith in the Old Testament, such as Elijah, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, refused to give up their freedom of conscience to government rulers.

In various ways, **the New Testament affirms soul freedom.** Jesus assumed that individuals had a God-given competency to decide to follow him or not. He indicated that persons were free to believe or not to believe but were held accountable for their choice (John 3:16-21). Some believed and followed, but some did not (Matthew 19:16-22).

**Jesus never coerced or forced persons to follow him** and thus never violated the soul freedom of individuals.

**Writers of the New Testament consistently set forth the concept of soul freedom.** For example, the apostle Paul wrote, "For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience?" (1 Corinthians 10:29 NIV). And he pleaded with the Galatian Christians, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1 NIV).

**Furthermore, leaders in the New Testament churches modeled soul competency.** They never forced anyone to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior. In fact, they resisted religious and governmental authorities who tried to force them not to believe in and speak for Jesus (Acts 5:17-42).

## Attacks on and Defense of Soul Competency

The concept of soul competency has been attacked for various reasons. Some persons contend that such freedom would limit God's sovereignty. A Baptist response to this challenge has been that the sovereign Lord of the universe chose to create human beings with freedom of choice. **The Bible clearly supports this view of human creation, holding forth as truth both the sovereignty of God and the soul freedom of humans.**

Others have charged that the idea of soul competency leads to human arrogance and pride. It can, of course, but correctly understood, it should lead to humility. **All human ability is a gift from God, including freedom of choice.**

Another accusation is that the concept of soul competency results in subjectivism and hyper-individualism with the accompanying neglect of the importance of the community of believers. Of course, doctrines have the potential of being carried to an extreme that is harmful, but properly understood, **soul freedom is exercised in the context of a community of believers.**

## A Summary of the Bible's Teaching on Soul Competency

In brief, the Bible sets forth the following principles regarding to soul competency:

- Individuals have a God-given competency to know God and his will.
- God, who is sovereign, provided this freedom to all humans.
- This competency is not a human creation.
- Persons therefore are free to make their own choices; they are not forced.
- God does not force anyone to follow him with his will; neither does he force anyone to believe.
- With this competency, individuals have responsibility and accountability for their actions and choices.
- In exercising soul competency, individuals seek insight from the Holy Spirit and the community, both private and public.
- The individual is responsible for his or her own faith response must be a personal response and not by a group or organization.
- Governments and religious organizations ought not force persons to believe in a particular church, creed, or conform to a particular doctrine. To do so violates the principle of soul competency. To do so violates the principle of soul competency. To do so violates the principle of soul competency.

## Soul Competency and Other Baptist Beliefs

Although soul competency might not be **the** Baptist distinctive, it is certainly foundational to other Baptist beliefs. “The Baptist distinctive” is the **total** of several precious beliefs and practices based solidly on the Bible.

However, **soul competency does relate to the other beliefs of Baptists** and indeed is foundational. For example, in regard to the authority of the Bible, Baptists insist that although Bible scholars, teachers, and pastors can provide helpful insights, the individual is competent and responsible to read, interpret, and apply the Scriptures for herself or himself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Baptists believe that the Bible teaches that salvation from sin and death to forgiveness and eternal life comes only by a faith response to God’s grace gift of his Son. Baptists further insist that persons are competent to respond to God’s grace by faith and that such faith must be a free choice. **Therefore, persons ought to be free from attempts by government or church officials to coerce faith or to hinder faith.**

**Religious freedom, therefore, is closely related to soul competency.** The devotion to the Bible’s teaching about soul competency is one of the reasons that Baptists have led in the struggle for religious freedom. For example, Thomas Helwys, a Baptist pastor in England in the early 1600s, objected to the efforts of King James to exercise authority over the religious beliefs and practices of his subjects. Helwys wrote a book advocating religious freedom and sent a copy to the king. In it he declared, “The king is a mortal man and not God and therefore has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them and to set spiritual lords over them.” Helwys acknowledged the king’s authority over temporal matters, but not spiritual. Even so, his words were considered seditious and the king cast the pastor into a horrible prison where he died.

But the Baptist contention for religious freedom did not die. Baptists and others continued the struggle for religious liberty, not just for themselves but for all persons. They were willing to sacrifice in order that the exercise of soul competency would not be hindered by religious or governmental authorities. After centuries of sacrificial struggle, religious freedom finally became a reality in the United States of America.

**The priesthood of all believers is another doctrine closely related to soul competency.**

The Bible teaches that when persons exercise their soul competency to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior they become

believer priests (1 Peter 2: 4-5, 9). Believer priests are to exercise their soul competency by direct relationship with God; in prayer and worship, for example, they need no human mediator. They are also to exercise their soul competency by seeking and following God's will in regard to matters such as their role in church governance, ministry, and actions to right the wrongs in society.

**Believer's baptism, another major Baptist emphasis, assumes soul competency.** Baptism is only for those who have freely responded by faith to God's grace gift of salvation. Baptism should never be forced on a person. Such an action would violate that person's God-given freedom of choice.

## Conclusion

One of the reasons why both secular and religious despots have persecuted Baptists heavily through the centuries is that these persons despise freedom. Fearing freedom, they attempt to force everyone into their religious mold.

In the face of such efforts, most Baptists have exercised their soul competency and responded positively to the apostle Paul's admonition: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Galatians 5:1).

**Baptists will also do well to always emphasize that freedom carries responsibility.** We are free in Christ to serve others in love: "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13).

*For further information, see [www.baptistdistinctives.org](http://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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