

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES₁

INTRODUCTION: There are a number of beliefs that are particular to Baptists and which differentiate Baptists from most other denominations & churches. "There are many ways to express (the Baptist) position. Some have chosen to use an acrostic:

B- Biblical authority
A- Autonomy of the local church
P- Priesthood of the believer
T- Two church officers (pastor [elder] & deacon)
I- Individual soul liberty
S- Saved church membership (members must be born again)
T- Two church ordinances (baptism & Lord's Supper)
S- Separation of church and state

"... (Some) groups stretch these "*distinctives*" into nine or ten statements, while still others combine some so that they have only five or six (e.g. material below). It is true that many denominational groups accept some of these statements whole-heartedly, but historic Baptists are the only ones who accept the complete list."²

Below is an explanatory listing of the "*Baptist Distinctives*," in a slightly different format than the acrostic found above:

THE SUPREMACY OF SCRIPTURE – **Ps. 19:7; John 5:39; 2 Tim. 3:16-17;** etc. The Bible is the only rule of faith and practice. Regarding the question of authority, Baptists believe the Bible alone is the final authority. Not church councils or ecclesiastical leaders.

THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS – **1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6;** etc. "The conclusion expounded by Peter that 'you are a holy priesthood' (**1 Peter 2:5, 9**) is a Biblical expression of a godly individuality; this is the second Baptist distinctive. Believers are directly accountable to God through Christ for the activities of their lives."³ The basic idea is that all believers are equally given the privilege of direct access to God through the merits of Jesus Christ (**1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6**). "From this simple biblical truth, Baptists emphasize several related ideas:

SOUL LIBERTY – "...soul liberty asks the individual believer-priest to act in a conscionable manner, accepting the responsibility for his actions. Soul liberty involves individual freedom under the Lordship of Christ (**Matt. 23:8; Rom. 10:9-10**)."⁴

FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE – "The Gospel message is dependent upon methods of persuasion, not coercion. The essence of the Gospel is voluntarism. Each individual has the right to voluntarily accept or reject, and will ultimately be judged by his Creator according to his choices. People are created as individuals, saved individually, accountable for individual action and are judged as individuals. Each one stands alone before God."⁵

VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION WITH OTHER BELIEVERS – i.e. no one is to be forced to join a particular church

THE INDEPENDENCE OF EACH LOCAL CHURCH – **Acts 13; 1 Cor. 5;** etc. The New Testament church was self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. "The New Testament neither mandates, nor gives examples of ecclesiastical hierarchies. The (local) church is autonomous and sovereign in all its actions whether in discipline of

¹ Compiled by Rev. Mike Edwards, 1981, Madison, Ohio, revised July, 1997, Goroka, Papua New Guinea, reformatted March 2021, Madison, Ohio.

² Virgil W. Bopp, "*Confidently Committed: A Look at the Baptist Heritage*" (Regular Baptist Press: Schaumburg, IL, 1987), pp. 24-25

³ Dell Johnson, "*Baptist by Conviction*." Pillsbury Bulletin (Pillsbury Baptist Bible College: Owatonna, MN, Dec-Jan 1980-81), p. 1

⁴ Bopp, op cit., p. 32

⁵ Johnson, op cit., p. 1

members (**1 Cor. 5**), election of officers (**Acts 6**), or in its associations with churches (**Acts 15**). There is no higher authority than an assembly of believers meeting to transact business with a pastor as its leader. There is no ecclesiastical authority (prelate, no convention personnel, no synod or council) higher than the Local Church."⁶

A REGENERATE CHURCH MEMBERSHIP – **Acts 2:41, 47**. The New Testament church added only those to its membership who were truly saved. "Faith, not geography, determined church membership. The New Testament church was a 'gathered church,' a voluntary church, a free church."⁷

THE BAPTISM OF BELIEVERS BY IMMERSION – **Matt. 3:13-17; 28:19-20; Acts 2:41**; etc.

The Bible in general and the book of Acts in particular, gives no example of an unbeliever being baptized.

Likewise, the New Testament never gives an example of an infant being baptized (e.g. **Acts 9:19; 16:13; 18:8**). Churches which baptize infants appeal to passages such as Cornelius' family (**Acts 10**) & the Philippian jailer (**Acts 16**), but those are strictly arguments from silence, since there is nothing in those texts to indicate the composition of those families, if they had children how old they may have been, etc.

New Testament baptism was always by immersion (cf. **Matt. 3:6; John 3:23; Acts 8:36, 38-39**). "The Greek word '*baptizo*,' which unfortunately was never translated into the English language, only transliterated as 'baptism,' means 'dip' or 'immerse' (Arndt & Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon, p. 131)."⁸

THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE – **Matt. 22:21**. "The church as an organization is not to interfere with the functioning of the state, and neither is the state to interfere with the functioning of the church. They are to be separate from each other because they serve in different spheres...In God's view, the state exists for the purpose of keeping people from destroying each other. The state is the institution charged to keep order in the society-protecting life, property and individual freedoms and rights. The state's functioning is in the area called temporal. Matthew 22:21 sharply and clearly defines limitations... The state is not to invade the religious sphere of things eternal... The responsibilities of the church as an institution are to preach the gospel, observe the ordinances and care for its membership spiritually and in the time of material need... It is important to note that Biblical Christianity in the form of local churches has existed in places where the political arenas were very different..."

"The state and the church are capable of four different relationships. The church may be under the state, as in nations where a state-run church exists and in Communist countries. The state may be under the church, as was true in the medieval world and most of the Spanish conquered Western world. The church may be alongside the state in a cooperative way, as in most of the Scandinavian countries. Or, the state and the church may be utterly free from each other—a free state which allows no substitution for the free exercise of religion... Historic Baptists have held to the free church and free state idea because of a biblical base (**Matt. 22:21; Rom. 13:1-7; Heb. 13:7, 17**)."⁹

CONCLUSION: Baptists hold to all of the cardinal, foundational beliefs that orthodox Christianity has held to for 20 centuries (e.g. the Trinity; Christ as the God-man; the Holy Spirit as God; the personality of the Holy Spirit; salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone; His blood atonement; the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead; the second coming of Christ; the infallibility & inerrancy of the Bible; etc.). The *Baptist Distinctives* listed in this paper are *in addition* to such fundamental doctrines of Christianity. Concepts such as the separation of church & state, as well as freedom of religion & freedom of choice, can be directly traced and credited to early Baptists and their predecessors. For such freedoms, which were sometimes secured at a tremendous price, we should indeed be thankful and give glory to God!

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid, p. 2

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Bopp, op cit., pp. 33-34