Baptist Basics

1 Why be a Baptist?

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There are many ways of being a Christian, so being a Baptist is not a way of being saved or of 'getting to heaven'. It is good to be clear about this. Jesus Christ alone is 'the way, the truth and the life' (John 14:6) so salvation and eternal life are given freely by God to all who trust in him, whichever part of the Church they then choose to belong to. The Christian life begins in the moment that we accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and start to follow him. But once we have begun this journey we face questions about how to live out in practice the life of the Christian disciple. We particularly have to face questions about what kind of Christian community we should belong to and how that church should organise its affairs. It is here that the Baptist way of being the church has important things to offer. The differences between Baptists and other kinds of Christians are almost all to do with the ways we go about doing and being church.

Baptists seek to hold together strong convictions with genuine freedoms. The convictions are about the centrality of Jesus Christ in our lives, the fact that through him we are able to draw near to the Father and that from him we can receive the Holy Spirit and become children of God. We know about all of this because of the testimony of the Bible which is the main source of Christian teachings. This is the faith we share with other Christians. But we see clearly that to be real, faith has to be free. In other words compulsory faith is not genuine faith. For this reason Baptists put a premium on religious freedom and resist every attempt to take it away from people. This leads to definite convictions about the church. The commitment to freedom can be emphasised in a number of ways.

Jesus Christ sets us free

'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Galatians 5:1). These words were originally spoken by the apostle Paul to a group of Christians who had been set

free from a form of religion that was heavy on rules and regulations. Now they were facing a new pressure, the manipulation of religious teachers telling them they were not proper Christians unless they submitted to something extra, in this case the need to be circumcised. Paul tells them that in Christ they are free, acceptable to God simply by reason of their faith in Christ and without the need for anything additional to him to prove their validity. This was a freedom not to be surrendered. Christians call Jesus, 'Lord' (Romans 10:9), but this is the divine kind of lordship that gives us freedom rather than takes our freedom away. Its aim is to take away those things that have prevented us being fully and properly human. In fact Christ makes us freer than we have ever been before, free to be our true selves. Jesus Christ is the gracious gift of the Christ-like God. He has set us free from the guilt and shame of our past lives by forgiving us and through his death reconciling us to the Father. He has set us free from the power of selfish and inward-looking lifestyles so that we can sincerely love other people in the power of God's Spirit. He has set us free from the fear of death by giving us the promise of eternal life and the hope of resurrection. All of this makes freedom very important. It comes from God through Christ in the Spirit and is to be celebrated.

A free church[1]

This is why Baptists speak about being a 'free' church or, on other occasions, about being a 'believers' church'. By this they mean that Christian freedom needs to be expressed in the way they live as the church. When believers come together in gatherings for worship and learning, they do so as a group of people who have freely chosen to do so because of Christ. They come because they want to. They are not required by law to worship in any particular way or to believe certain things. The first Baptist church was founded in 1609 in Amsterdam, among people who had suffered persecution and oppression from a State Church and did not want to repeat

the experience. They came to the conviction that they were not under the power of any external body or person but were free to govern their own affairs under the Lordship of Christ and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is sometimes referred to as 'congregational government' or 'the priesthood of all believers' and is in contrast to the idea that only some are priests and have a privileged access to God which can give them the right to command others in matters of faith.

Baptists believe there is a radical equality among believers, although this does not mean some can't be called by a congregation to exercise gifts of teaching, pastoral oversight and leadership. In practice, congregational government is worked out through the church members gathering in a 'Church Members' Meeting'[2] to consider the life and work of the church. In other words they seek to do 'what seems good to the Holy Spirit and us' (Acts 15:28). As those seeking to be mature in Christ, they seek to discern what God wants, as best they can. This is both a large responsibility and a great privilege. It means that the local church can pursue its understanding of its mission in a very flexible way which has the maximum 'ownership' of the free congregation. Baptists think this way about the local church because they believe the promise of Jesus: 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' (Matthew 18:20). It is the presence of Christ in the local Christian community that enables it to do his work. At the same time they recognise the value of associating with other congregations for the common good in a way which is *inter-dependent* not just *independent*.

Believers' baptism

It is here that we can understand the place of baptism. The most obvious conviction Baptists have is that they only baptise those who are able to choose and confess Christ freely for themselves. This means they decline to baptise infants. Baptism is the sign commanded by Jesus (Matthew 28:19) that a person has responded to and chosen the way of Christ. A free church is unwilling to impose the Christian faith even upon its own children, although

it is more than willing to nurture its young people in the faith in the hope that one day they will make the choice for themselves. But following Christ is a decision that no-one can make on our behalf. It is always a decision we must make for ourselves and it involves repentance (intentionally turning away from a sinful way of life) and faith (placing one's faith personally and directly in Jesus Christ as Lord). Baptism speaks about a new beginning. It symbolises the death of the old life and rising to a new life. This is why Baptists practise baptism by 'total immersion', whereby people are immersed in water, either in the sea, a river or a specially provided baptismal pool, to set out dramatically what it means to follow Christ. Believers' baptism for Christian disciples brings together the element of conviction with that of freedom. No one would ask to be publicly baptised by total immersion if they did not have sincere convictions about it. But being of an age to make their own decisions, they are clearly exercising their own free choice in doing so.

Freedom of religion

It might by now be obvious that Baptists are more likely to be at home in a society that values freedom. It is a matter of historical fact that Baptists have thrown themselves into the fight against tyranny and political oppression and have made a substantial contribution to the growth of democratic and freedom-loving societies. In fact Baptists were among the first people to call for complete religious freedom. If faith is only genuine if it is free, it follows that it is not the task of states and governments to interfere with people's religious convictions. Rather the State is called to safeguard religious freedoms and to ensure that nobody is persecuted or discriminated against on the grounds of their convictions. This is sometimes called the 'separation of Church and State ' because it makes a clear distinction between religious faith, which should only be spread by means of persuasion, and political power which has the ability to compel. Baptists can be found therefore struggling not only for the right to believe but the equal right for people not to believe. They are opposed to the idea of religious nationalism, that is, the belief that if you are a citizen of a particular country you must share the traditional religion of that country or be considered an alien or even a traitor. If religious freedom is the foundation of all other civic freedoms, it can be seen that Baptists have helped to shape the kind of free societies many countries today enjoy.

Sharing the faith

Because Baptists are people of conviction they are strongly committed to sharing their faith by word and deed through what are usually termed 'mission' and 'evangelism'[3]. This is best expressed as 'bearing witness' to the truth as it is in Jesus, in the belief that God will use that witness to draw to it those who are ready to receive it for themselves. It is in this way that Baptist churches have drawn many people to themselves and proven to be a spiritual home for people from all backgrounds. Because they are people who love freedom they are strongly opposed to any forms of mission and evangelism that might be thought to deprive other people of their freedom to choose.

Baptist DNA

We have tried to answer the question 'Why be a Baptist?' by pointing to the combination of conviction and freedom that characterises the Baptist way of being church. This is an attractive combination and in itself constitutes a good reason for being a Baptist. Baptist Christians have an identity and like all identities it is made up of various factors coming together in a particular blend. This is certainly true of human identity which is formed by the genetic code that every individual inherits. Can we therefore identify a genetic code of convictions and practices that creates a Baptist identity and makes it a distinctive Christian movement? The following may be thought of as the individual genes that create a common identity:

- **The lordship of Christ** that sets us free to be our true selves
- **The authority of the bible** because in the bible we learn about Christ
- **Baptism for believers** because it expresses a truly personal faith

- **A believers' church** because it is a genuine expression of Christian community, a gathering of Christians called together to be in covenant commitment to each other
- **The priesthood of all believers** because it affirms the place of all Christians in the worship and service of God
- **Church membership and Church Members' Meetings** because in this way we can all take responsibility for the life of the church
- **Interdependence** because we need each other and each church needs other churches
- **Sharing the faith** because we are people of conviction and want others to become part of us
- **Religious freedom** because only free faith is true faith and all should have the freedom to come to their own convictions

In short, to be a Baptist Christian is to belong to a movement with an honourable history, clear core convictions, a commitment to community and an evangelical, Christian faith that is profoundly committed to freedom. It is a movement, with Christ at the centre, with mainstream Christian beliefs but with a radical edge to its commitment. These all constitute good reasons for being part of a Baptist church. Baptists also have a good future to look forward to. Across the world there are an estimated 110 million Baptists, making this the second largest Protestant Christian denomination in the world. In addition there are many others who share Baptist convictions in other denominations. By the grace of God this movement will continue to exercise an influence for good across the globe as it continues to grow strongly.

For more information see:

[1] Baptist Basics: Radical Dissent

[2] Baptist Basics: The Church Members' Meeting

[3] Baptist Basics: Mission and Evangelism

Baptist Basics

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