

Eastwood Baptist (8/4/'18)

WHO ARE THE BAPTISTS?

Baptist Origins

1517 Luther's "95 theses" - the beginning of the Reformation

1525 "Swiss Brethren" break with Zwingli - beginning of "Anabaptists"

1528 Earliest record of Anabaptists in England (reports through to 1575)

1580 Browne's "gathered church" in Norwich - the beginning of
"Independency" (later, Congregationalists and Baptists)

1608 Smyth and Helwys lead group to Amsterdam, where they encounter
Mennonites (Anabaptist)

1612 Helwys returns to England with first known congregation of Baptists
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the beginning of distinct Baptist groups

1626 Six known General Baptist congregations (about 175 members)

1642 Two definite Particular Baptist congregations formed

Baptist Identity Baptists don't have any authoritative confession which all accept (unlike Anglicans and Presbyterians, for example), so it's not surprising that there has been a variety of attempts to define Baptist identity. My opinion is that all Baptist beliefs spring from **the fundamental conviction that the Christianity of the New Testament is for all times**. This conviction is not peculiar to Baptists (being shared, for example, with Anabaptists, Congregationalists and Churches of Christ). But it has developed in a particular way. Baptists have not set out to be distinctive, but to be biblical, so it's not surprising that Baptists share many beliefs with other Christian groups, particularly groups which hold to traditional orthodox beliefs, groups which are often termed "Evangelical". But some Baptist beliefs, when taken together, do distinguish them from most, if not all, other Evangelical groups. Prominent among these are two beliefs involving faith. At the individual level, Baptists hold to **the necessity of personal faith in Jesus Christ**. This is based on many passages in the New Testament, but we might take **Romans 1:16-17** and **Galatians 3:6-9** as examples. At the church level, Baptists hold to **a believers' church**, to local churches made up of people who have a personal faith in Jesus Christ. Partly this is inferred from the passages in the NT which teach the necessity of personal faith, but some passages bear directly on this belief, particularly **Acts 2:41-42** and **1 Corinthians 12:3,12-13a,27**. Going back to the individual level, Baptists hold to **believers' baptism (normally by immersion)** as the

proper way to make a public declaration of one's faith. Although this is challenged by many other Christians, it seems to me that the NT evidence is strong. Narrative material supports this as the practice of the NT church, e.g. **Acts 2:38**. And teaching material points in the same direction, e.g. **Romans 6:1-4**.

Baptists have generally also held to the principle of **freedom of conscience**. This arose in early days when many Baptists were persecuted, but they also saw support for this in the NT. In part, they appealed to direct statements, such as **Galatians 5:1**, but there are few of these. Mainly it is an inference from more fundamental beliefs. If, it is argued, a Christian is bound to live according to faith in Jesus Christ, acting in accord with the Scriptures and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, then the Christian must not be subject to external compulsion which prevents such obedient living. To their credit, Baptists have usually defended such freedom for others as well as for themselves. Going back now to the church level, Baptists have generally seen other principles as arising from their holding to a believers' church. They have held to **the priesthood of all believers**, appealing especially to **1 Peter 2:9**. They have also reasoned that if each believer can come in faith to Christ for himself or herself, then all are "priests". The term has been given two interpretations, and both seem appropriate to me. Each believer has direct access to God, without any human intermediary. And each believer is called to be God's representative toward the world, praying for and witnessing to those who have not yet come to faith. Baptists, like most other Christians, acknowledge Christ as Lord of the church. Our calling is to please him rather than ourselves. But Baptists disagree with some other Christians about how to discern Christ's will for each church. They do not believe that this is to be done by one person or a select group, but by all active members of the church - this is known as **congregational government**. Once again, some support is found in specific NT passages, such as **Matthew 18:15-18**, but it is also seen as consistent with holding to a believers' church and the priesthood of all believers. Closely allied with congregational government is **the autonomy (or self-government) of the local church**. The reasoning is that congregational government is only possible if each congregation is able to control its own affairs. To avoid exaggeration, it needs to be said that Baptists have consistently seen these two principles as consistent with appointing leaders with defined areas of responsibility and with voluntarily associating with other churches so as to serve Christ better than would be possible in isolation. It also needs to be acknowledged that Baptists have not all agreed about the details of how to put these principles into practice.

Conclusion Baptists, like other Protestants, are children of the Reformation. More specifically, we belong to what is sometimes called the Radical wing of the Reformation, standing with those who want to be

thoroughgoing in applying the teaching of Scripture both to personal faith and church life. I believe that the desire to be a New Testament church in our own day is the foundational idea of Baptist belief and practice. Here is a diagram summary of what I have said:

The Christianity of the NT is for our time also

Individual application

Church application

The necessity of personal faith, leading to:
 leading to: Believers' baptism
 Priesthood of all believers

A believers' church,

Freedom of conscience
government

Congregational

church

Autonomy of the local