

**On Being Baptist**  
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*Preface to the Congregation*

Since I currently serve in a non-denominational Bible church, one might wonder why I am a candidate for the lead pastoral position in a Baptist church. I am certain that some of you question whether I am sufficiently Baptist in my theology to be worthy of your consideration. That is a fair question. With this in mind I offer the following essay, "On Being Baptist." I have written it specifically for you, the members of the First Baptist Church of New York City, as you prayerfully seek an undershepherd for your congregation. You will notice that it is largely written in the third person; thus it is intentionally more of a position paper than a first-person defense. Of course the conclusions I have drawn are my own and reflect my understanding of Baptist theology in general and the particular stream of Baptist thought with which I am most comfortable.

It may be helpful at the outset to recount briefly my own denominational history. My father came to Christ as an adult and soon began to take my sister and me to a Lutheran church (Missouri Synod). There God clarified his understanding of the gospel through Evangelism Explosion training. My dad, however, never accepted the Lutheran doctrine of infant baptism and eventually left that church for an independent Baptist church. It was there that I first came to Christ as an eight-year-old. I was a member of that church through high school.

In college I attended a variety of churches: Tabernacle Baptist Church in Ithaca, NY; Mountain Home Independent Baptist Church in Mountain Home, NC; and Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, SC. As my wife and I prepared for marriage, we decided to visit a number of churches in Upstate SC where my seminary was located. We finally chose to become members of Heritage Bible Church in Greer, where we have been members since 2001. Our aim was not to leave the Baptist denomination *per se*; in fact, Heritage is more Baptist in polity than anything else. We simply found a church that reflected our developing theology and ministry philosophy.

In many ways I have never left the core of Baptist teaching, which I hope the appended essay demonstrates. Nevertheless, at present I cannot affirm that I would consider pastoring in a Baptist context alone. There are certainly streams of Baptist thought with which I would distance myself, but there are just as surely other currents with which I resonate. Some of my favorite authors past and present are Baptist: John Bunyan, Charles Spurgeon, John Piper, Mark Dever. If the following essay faithfully represents Baptist theology, then I would be honored to serve as a pastor in a Baptist church.

## Introduction

The task of identifying precisely what distinguishes Baptist churches has been undertaken many times with varying results. Some prefer simply to identify a historic Baptist statement, such as the New Hampshire Confession of Faith. Others explicitly identify so-called Baptist Distinctives.<sup>1</sup> But among the latter there is no authoritative, universally-affirmed list. For example, Edward T. Hiscox identifies eight “distinctive characteristics” of Baptist churches,<sup>2</sup> the General Association of Regular Baptists names a different eight,<sup>3</sup> a professor at New Orleans Baptist Seminary argues for nine,<sup>4</sup> and the dean of Truett Seminary at Baylor University finds ten.<sup>5</sup>

These approaches vary for a number of reasons. First, some formulations transgress the bounds of what is truly distinctive about Baptists by including items that are held by non-Baptists. The priesthood of the believer, for example, was as dear to Martin Luther as to C. H. Spurgeon. It appears that some authors confuse beliefs that are uniquely Baptist with beliefs that they hold as Baptists.<sup>6</sup> Second, the target of these formulations varies. In other words, authors apparently had different answers to the question, “From what are Baptists distinct?” One therefore might emphasize the difference between Baptists and Presbyterians (e.g., baptism), while someone else might point out what distinguishes Baptists from Anglicans (e.g., the relationship between church and state).

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<sup>1</sup> To speak of “distinctives” is grammatically problematic. The word *distinctive* is primarily an adjective, not a noun. Most dictionaries (e.g., *The American Heritage Dictionary* and *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*) list the noun as *distinctiveness* and recognize the term *distinctive* as an adjective only.

<sup>2</sup> He lists the following: 1. As to a Christian church; 2. As to baptism; 3. Proper subjects for baptism; 4. Proper subjects for communion; 5. Subjects for church membership; 6. The form of church government; 7. As to church officers; and 8. As to doctrinal belief. *Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches* (n.p.: Judson, 1894; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1980), 14-19.

<sup>3</sup> The GARBC uses the acronym BAPTISTS: 1. Biblical authority; 2. Autonomy of the local church; 3. Priesthood of the believer; 4. Two ordinances; 5. Individual soul liberty; 6. Saved, baptized church membership; 7. Two offices; and 8. Separation of church and state. “Baptist Distinctives,” [www.garbc.org/news/?page\\_id=32](http://www.garbc.org/news/?page_id=32), accessed 21 November 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Lemke’s list includes the following: 1. Soul Competency/Priesthood of All Believers/Religious Liberty (not Established Church, Christian Reconstructionism, Theocratic Dominionism, or Theonomy); 2. Age of Accountability (not Original Sin as Inherited Guilt); 3. Believer’s Baptism/The Gathered Church (not Infant Baptism); 4. Baptism by the Mode of Immersion (not Sprinkling or Pouring); 5. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as Symbolic Ordinances (not as Sacraments); 6. Congregational Church Polity (not Presbyterian Church Polity); 7. Local Church Autonomy (not a Hierarchical Denomination); 8. Two Scriptural Officers: Pastor/Bishop/Elder and Deacon (not Three Officers: Pastor/Bishop, Elder, and Deacon); and 9. Decisional Conversion/Gospel Invitations (not Confirmation). “What is a Baptist? Nine Marks that Separate Baptists from Presbyterians” in *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry*, vol. 5, no. 5 (Spring 2009)

<sup>5</sup> David Garland understands these to be the Baptist distinctives: 1. Christian Faith; 2. The Scriptures; 3. Priesthood of All Believers; 4. Baptism of Believers; 5. The Lord’s Supper; 6. Soul Competency; 7. Religious Liberty; 8. Believers’ Church; 9. Autonomy of the Local Congregation; 10. Separation of Church and State. “Baptist Distinctives,” [www.baylormag.com/story.php?story=006209](http://www.baylormag.com/story.php?story=006209), accessed 21 November 2009.

<sup>6</sup> This line of thinking might be represented by the following (fallacious) syllogism: I am a Baptist; I believe X; therefore, X is a distinctively Baptist doctrine.

This leads to a third reason: some incorporate beliefs that distinguish one's own Baptist group from other Baptists.<sup>7</sup> Thus statements on bibliology (e.g., translation preference), soteriology (Calvinism, Arminianism, or a *tertium quid*), and eschatology (e.g., pretribulation rapture) may find their way into a group's understanding of what it means to be Baptist. While it is understandable that such elements would be considered as distinguishing features of one's group, to smuggle them into the definition of the term *Baptist* is ahistorical and breeds confusion.<sup>8</sup>

In order to identify what distinguishes Baptists from other denominations, one must sort through their many confessions, catechisms, and statements to determine what is common among Baptists across theological lines. What might at first appear to be daunting proves actually to be fairly simple. Baptists are distinct from other world religions in that they are *Christian*, Baptists are distinct from the rest of Christendom in that they are *Protestant*, and Baptists are distinct from the rest of Protestantism in that they are *credobaptist* in practice and *congregationalist* in polity.<sup>9</sup> This essay focuses on the last of these statements.

### *Baptism*

There can be no doubt that the Baptist position on baptism has distinguished it since its history began.<sup>10</sup> The particular issue with which Baptists differ from other Protestants is the subjects of baptism.<sup>11</sup> Protestants agree that newly-believing adults should undergo

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<sup>7</sup> This reasoning turns the syllogism in a different direction: I believe X; I am a Baptist; therefore all Baptists believe X.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the Unregistered Baptist Fellowship affirms as its purpose "to provide an opportunity for men of like spirit and like mind, who are personally and ecclesiastically separated, *holding to the historic Baptist doctrines of the written Word of God (KJV 1611)*." "The Unregistered Baptist Fellowship: What Is It?" [www.unregisteredbaptistfellowship.com](http://www.unregisteredbaptistfellowship.com), accessed 21 November 2009, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> While differing in particulars, this organization reflects a helpful summary from Thomas J. Nettles: "The terms *orthodox*, *evangelical*, and *separate* give both the necessary parameters and the necessary freedom to a definition of what it means to be Baptist." *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Lake Charles, LA: Cor Meum Tibi, 2002), 14.

<sup>10</sup> There is considerable debate about when Baptist history actually began. H. Leon McBeth identifies four positions: "These four views hold that Baptists originated from: 1. The outgrowth of English Separatism. 2. The influence of biblical Anabaptists. 3. The continuation of biblical teaching through the ages. 4. The succession of organized Baptist churches through the ages." *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 49. A full discussion of the matter is beyond the scope of this essay; I will merely affirm my belief that Baptist history began in the early seventeenth century.

<sup>11</sup> Some argue that, in addition to the *subjects* of baptism, the *mode* of baptism is likewise a distinguishing feature of Baptist teaching. There are two problems with this view. First, early Baptists were not consistently immersionists. Second, other denominations (e.g., The Greek Orthodox Church) also practice immersion; thus it is not distinctively Baptist. Immersion has certainly become the standard Baptist practice. Article 14 of the New Hampshire Confession of 1833 articulates, "We believe that Christian baptism is *the immersion in water* of a believer, into the name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost" (emphasis added). The Reformed Baptist Theological Review explicitly distinguishes the Baptist view from others: "Baptism is properly and biblically administered by immersion in water. The common

baptism.<sup>12</sup> What distinguishes Baptists is their objection to infant baptism. Article XIV of John Smyth's 1609 Short Confession of Faith states, "Baptism is the external sign of the remission of sins, of dying and of being made alive, and *therefore does not belong to infants*" (emphasis added). Similarly the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession affirms, "Those who actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, are *the only proper subjects* for this ordinance" (29.3, emphasis added). In his 1855 catechism, Spurgeon writes, "Baptism is to be administered to all those who actually profess repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, *and to none other*" (Q76, emphasis added). This teaching reflects the consistent New Testament witness that baptism is for professing believers (Mt 28.19; Ac 2.38, 41; 8.12; 18.8; 19.4), while giving infant baptism no explicit command or example.

One natural consequence of the Baptist view of baptism is the belief in a regenerate church membership. Unlike Presbyterians, who knowingly admit unregenerate children into the visible church, Baptists affirm that only those who are truly regenerate ought to be members of the visible church. Article XV in the 1834 Treatise on the Faith and Practices of Free Will Baptists asserts, "A Christian church is an organized body of believers in Christ. . . . Believers in Christ are admitted to this church on giving evidence of faith in Christ, obtaining consent of the body, being baptized, and receiving the right hand of fellowship." Baptists recognize that no one can know for sure whether a person is regenerate; what distinguishes the Baptist view is their withholding membership in the visible church from the known unregenerate.<sup>13</sup> The Baptist view on the subjects and mode of baptism – together with its implication for church membership – is a distinguishing mark of its churches.<sup>14</sup>

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Greek word for immersion or dipping is the word used in the New Testament. The argument that the word has an occasional historic example 'to pour' or 'to sprinkle' is surely special pleading. There are perfectly good Greek words which mean 'to sprinkle' and 'to pour.' Yet, the New Testament employs the word for immersion ("What is a Reformed Baptist?" [www.rbtr.org/refbaptist.html](http://www.rbtr.org/refbaptist.html), accessed 21 November 2009). Since the Greek term βαπτίζω does not always refer to the full immersion of the thing baptized (cf. Mk 7.3-4 [note textual variant]; Lk 11.38; 1 Co 10.1-2), I believe the strongest biblical argument for immersion to be the spiritual reality of which baptism is a visible picture. Water baptism illustrates the believers' union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Ro 6.1-11). The mode that best represents what baptism pictures is immersion (Ro 6.3-5; Co 2.12). Baptism by immersion, therefore, accurately reflects Scriptural teaching. Still, baptism by immersion is not a distinctively Baptist teaching.

<sup>12</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith, for example, assumes this point. "Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents, are to be baptized" (28.4). It goes on to speak of the blessing of baptism to the baptized "whether of age or infants" (28.6).

<sup>13</sup> The Reformed Baptist Theological Review laments that this affirmation is eroding among Baptists. "A careful reading of the NT epistles shows that the Apostles assumed that all the members of Christ's churches were 'saints,' 'faithful brethren,' and 'cleansed by Christ.' Sadly, many Baptist churches today are more concerned with having a 'decisioned membership' and a 'baptized membership' rather than a regenerate membership. It is the duty of the pastors and people of true churches to ensure, according to the best of their ability, that no unconverted person makes his or her way into the membership of a church." "What is a Reformed Baptist?"

<sup>14</sup> One recent debate among Baptists concerns whether believers who were baptized as children in a covenantal context should be allowed membership in Baptist churches without being baptized after

## Congregationalism

The second distinguishing feature of Baptist churches is that they are congregational in polity.<sup>15</sup> From its earliest days Baptist teaching has affirmed the responsibility of a local church to govern itself under the headship of Christ and according to the rule of Scripture. The 1609 Short Confession of Faith by John Smyth states, “The church of Christ has *power delegated to themselves* of announcing the word, administering the sacraments, appointing ministers, disclaiming them, and also excommunicating; but the last appeal is to the brethren of body [*sic*] of the church” (Article XIII, emphasis added). Two centuries later this practice was articulated in the New Hampshire Confession: “We believe that a visible Church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by his laws, and *exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word*” (Article 13, emphasis added). This affirmation of Christ’s headship over the church (Mt 16.18; Ep 1.22-23; 5.23; Co 1.18) and congregational participation in matters such as selecting leaders (Ac 6.5; 13.1-3; 15.22) and church discipline (Ro 14.1; 1 Co 5.1-13; 2 Co 2.5-11) reflects New Testament teaching.

Baptist congregationalism is not, however, a strict democracy.<sup>16</sup> Congregational participation is not the only feature of church polity taught in the New Testament;

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conversion. In 2005 Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN, amended its constitution and bylaws to “make it possible for some persons to be admitted into membership who are not baptized as believers by immersion. The situation we [elders] have in mind involves those who are convinced that their being baptized as a believer would violate their biblically informed conscience.” Bethlehem’s pastor, John Piper, explains, “The official position of Bethlehem Baptist Church remains that only baptism by immersion of believers will be taught and practiced by the church. What this amendment does is create a kind of conscientious-objection clause. . . . The amendment implies that we disagree with that judgment but do not elevate the difference between us over the time and mode of baptism to the point that it would always exclude a person from membership.” “Baptism and Church Membership: The Recommendation from the Elders for Amending Bethlehem’s Constitution.” [http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/TopicIndex/70/1306\\_Baptism\\_and\\_Church\\_Membership\\_The\\_Recommendation\\_from\\_the\\_Elders\\_for\\_Amending\\_Bethlehems\\_Constitution/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/TopicIndex/70/1306_Baptism_and_Church_Membership_The_Recommendation_from_the_Elders_for_Amending_Bethlehems_Constitution/), accessed 21 November 2009. Wayne Grudem took a similar position in the first edition of his *Systematic Theology* but reverted to the standard Baptist view in his second edition. Piper and Grudem engaged in a gracious, public debate over the matter. Their statements and responses are available on Desiring God’s website.

<sup>15</sup> There have certainly been other groups that have practiced congregational polity (e.g., Free Churches, Congregational Churches). But the combination of credobaptism with congregationalism has been a historic, differentiating feature of Baptist churches.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin T. Bauder, the president of Central Baptist Seminary in Minneapolis, MN, underscores the problem of confusing congregationalism with democracy: “Why hesitate to speak of democratic churches? The answer is that democracy is, at the end of the day, a polity of force. In a true democracy, fifty percent of the people plus one can impose their will upon fifty percent minus one. That being the case, the spirit of democracy is for each party to seek sufficient numbers to enforce its will upon the minority. Democracy lends itself to partisan politics, fostering the worst sort of manipulation, demagoguery, and even character assassination. If one person can manage to stampede fifty-one percent, then he has a majority and he can rule—even at the expense of trampling the minority. Nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of the New Testament. Democracies count votes, but a church that determines

together with this is an emphasis on authoritative leadership (1 Th 5.12; He 13.7, 17; 1 Pt 5.2, 5). Baptists have consistently held that the leadership of their churches consists in two offices: elder<sup>17</sup> and deacon. Thus the Second London Confession testifies, “A particular church, gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members; and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church (so called and gathered), for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of power or duty, which he entrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are bishops or elders, and deacons” (26.8).

Scripture sets forth the responsibilities of these offices. Elders are the primary leaders of the church (Ph 1.1; 1 Pt 5.1-2) who must meet scriptural qualifications before taking office (1 Ti 3.1-7; Ti 1.6-9). Scripture sets a multiplicity of elders as the pattern for a local church (Ac 14.23; 20.17; Ti 1.5; Js 5.14).<sup>18</sup> Following the example of Christ, their leadership is servant leadership (Ph 2.5-8; 2 Ti 2.24-26). Deacons are also servants of the church, whose primary responsibility is to minister mercy to those in material and/or physical need (Ac 6.1-3). Scripture outlines qualifications for these officers as well (1 Ti 3.8-13). By providing leadership in the area of meeting material needs, deacons lighten the load for the elders, so that the latter may fulfill their spiritual oversight of the flock (Ac 6.4; 1 Pt 5.1-2).

One unfortunate byproduct of congregational teaching in some contexts is an unhealthy emphasis on Baptist churches being independent. To the extent that the term

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its policies by bare majorities is in sad shape indeed. We can go through the New Testament with a microscope and never discover a church that is governed by the naked voting strength of a majority of its members.” Bauder summarizes the result of such thinking: “Some have embraced the most populist forms of congregationalism, while others have rejected congregationalism in favor of some polity that they perceive as less rough-and-tumble. Both extremes are mistaken, and both can be corrected by noting what is and is not implied by New Testament congregationalism.” “Populism and Congregationalism,” *In the Nick of Time* 9 October 2009. <http://www.centraseminary.edu/publications/Nick/Nick238.html>, accessed 25 November 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Baptists here reflect the teaching of the New Testament, in which *elder* is used synonymously with *pastor/shepherd* and *bishop/overseer*, so that they refer collectively to a single office (Ac 20.17, 28; 1 Pt 5.1-2).

<sup>18</sup> While the New Testament identifies having multiple elders to be the common practice of the early church, it must be admitted that Scripture stops short of mandating this practice. By so doing God relieves new and/or smaller churches from what could be an impossible requirement. Further, Baptist churches differ with one another as to whether the multiplicity of elders should be restricted to paid ministers or should include lay elders. For a summary of Baptist articulations of these views, see Greg Wills, “The Church,” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Nine Marks Ministries, 2001), 33-34. For both biblical and practical reasons, I believe that the best model is to include both staff and lay elders who lead the congregation together, with one elder (“the pastor”) designated as a first among equals (after the example of Moses with the seventy, Peter with the apostles, and Timothy with the Ephesian elders). Some erroneously interpret this polity within the grid of the American governmental system. Such a misunderstanding views the Pastor as the President, the Assistant Pastors as the Cabinet, the Elders as the Senate, and the Deacons as the House. But this seriously confuses the teaching of Scripture, in which paid and lay elders are sharers of the same office, holding together the same authority and responsibility for the leadership of the church. For a biblical description of the interrelationship of the leadership and the congregation, see Mark Dever, *A Display of God’s Glory: Basics of Church Structure* (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001).

*independent* refers to self-governance, it is appropriate. But in far too many instances, the idea has grown to mean an unwillingness to grant Christian recognition to or to partner together with other churches for the sake of the gospel. In some cases these churches maintain independence from other Protestant denominations; others, however, are proudly independent of other Baptists. This is problematic for two reasons. First, the Church of Christ, inclusive as it is of all who repent and believe the gospel (1 Co 12.3, 12-13), is much broader than one's own denomination (Mt 16.18). Certainly Scripture teaches that believers are responsible to expose false teachers (Ro 16.17-18; Jd 3). But churches of all stripes must be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ep 4.3). An overemphasis on independence carries the potential of ripping apart the unity that the Spirit has already created. A second reason that this is problematic is that it does not follow the pattern of New Testament churches. Yes, first century congregations were self-governing, but they were not independent of one another. If anything, they were *interdependent*, working together for the cause of Christ as much as they were able (Ac 15.22ff.; Ro 15.25-27; 1 Co 16.1-3; 2 Co 8.1-4).

### *Summary*

Baptists are *credobaptist* in practice and *congregationalist* in polity. They may be more than this, but one cannot be less than this and still wear the label. Within the wide stream of Baptist thinking there are many different currents, some healthy, some not. But what defines and distinguishes Baptists from other Protestant groups are these two doctrines.