



The Baptists

Introduction

Point of Origin

Key Points of Belief

Points of Difference Between Baptists

Baptist Doctrine Versus Scripture

Weak Points in the Baptist Faith

Review Questions

References

Introduction: About one out of every ten people in America is a Baptist. The Southern Baptist Convention alone has over 15 million members. Yet, it is only one of 27 Baptist denominations in the United States (Mead, 1980). It would be very difficult to live in the United States without encountering Baptists and their influence. Baptist leaders, such as Billy Graham, are often in the news. The struggle between moderates and conservatives within the Southern Baptist Convention has been the subject of many headlines in recent years. Chances are that several of your neighbors and co-workers are of the Baptist faith. What do you know about their beliefs and their beginnings?

< Point of Origin >

Over the years, Baptists have made several unique claims about their origins. Some Baptists have actually maintained that they originated in the days of John "the Baptist." Several have said they could trace the existence of Baptists in an unbroken line of succession through various religious groups all the way back to the first century.

While there are still many who say such things in ignorance, Baptist scholars now admit that these claims are fanciful and false. For instance, Robert Torbet conceded that the successionist arguments were borrowed from the "Roman Catholic Church" and "the Church of England"; they were used "at a time when Baptists were engaged in a developing sectarian rivalry with the Methodists, the Presbyterians, and, in particular, the Disciples of Christ" in order to give a "denomination without a long and rich historical heritage a reason for pride by carrying their history back to the first century" (p. 19). Baptist scholar Dr. William Williams said that "Baptists who are urging our claim on the ground of an historical succession, are only doing harm to us with all

intelligent and well-read people." (Porter, p. 8).

To know the truth of Baptist origins, one must have some knowledge of events during the first 100 years or so of the Protestant Reformation (1510 to 1610 A. D.). The establishment of the Church of England during that time had not brought about the reforms many English-men thought were needed. These men, known as Puritans, at first tried to "purify" and change the Church of England from within. When this was not successful, some of them separated to form independent congregations; they were known as Separatists. The Puritan Separatists were not tolerated by the British Crown. Being persecuted, many fled to the colonies or other countries, notably the Netherlands. In Holland, they came in contact with the Anabaptists who were scattered throughout Europe.

The Anabaptist movement had begun as an offshoot from Ulrich Zwingli's reformation efforts in Zurich, Switzerland in the early 1500's. The term Anabaptist means "rebaptizer". Anabaptists did not believe the sprinkling received by infants in the Catholic Church constituted valid baptism, so they practiced baptism of adults upon a confession of faith. They preferred to be known simply as disciples, and were committed to restoring early Christianity rather than just reforming the church. They also believed in congregational autonomy and the separation of church and state (Yoder & Kreider, 1977). A group of Anabaptists came to be called Mennonites after a leading Anabaptist named Menno Simons.

The modern Baptist movement really originated when Separatist beliefs mixed with Anabaptist beliefs in Amsterdam at the beginning of the 1600's. Puritan Separatist John Smyth had gone from England to Amsterdam to escape the religious persecution under King James. He was completely overwhelmed with the Anabaptist teaching on baptism, and he naturally agreed with their positions on the separation of church and state and congregational autonomy. Smyth baptized himself and his followers to form the first English Baptist church in 1609.

After the disciples of Smyth founded the Baptist movement in England, controversies emerged over such things as whether predestination was general or particular. Most Baptists, then and now, would agree with John Calvin on issues such as these.

< Distinctive Points of Baptist Belief >

In his book, *Why I Am A Baptist*, Louie Newton lists several "basic distinctives in the

Baptist position" (1957, p. 69). We quote him on the first five points listed below:

1. "The supreme authority of the Bible, and its sufficiency as our rule of faith and practice." Generally, Baptists have a high regard for the scriptures. However, they do have "manuals" and numerous confessional statements which explain their viewpoint on the meaning of the Bible and give practical instructions for service. For instance, the New Hampshire Confession of Faith has been published and applauded by Southern Baptists. It is highly Calvinistic, but it proclaims the Bible to be "without any mixture of error." However, in recent years there has been a major schism among the Southern Baptists over the inspiration of the Bible; conservatives have held that every word comes directly from the mouth of God, while moderates have argued that the Bible merely "contains" the word of God.

2. "The competency of the individual soul in its direct approach to God." In the Baptist view, an individual does not need to go through an earthly priest to approach God, nor must he rely upon statements of law by a church in order to understand God's will. Baptists recognize the priesthood of all believers. The Baptist emphasis upon the worth of the individual is clearly seen in their democratic form of church government which encourages membership-wide participation.

3. "The absolute separation of church and state." John Smyth wrote, "The magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine" (Torbet, 1963, p. 489). Many Baptists suffered persecution in defense of this principle. In the United States, the provision in the Bill of Rights guaranteeing separation of church and state is there largely as a result of Baptist influence.

4. "Baptism by immersion, of believers only." From their beginning, Baptists have held that baptism is a believer's privilege. Thus, they have never recognized the baptism of infants as valid. For a time, very early in their history, some allowed sprinkling for baptism, but this practice soon disappeared. Baptists do not regard baptism as necessary for salvation, but as necessary for obedience. Therefore, they hold that there are saved believers in all denominations. These believers may be accepted into a Baptist church upon a vote of the membership.

5. "The complete independence of the local church, and its voluntary interdependence in associated fellowship with other Baptist churches." Baptists emphasize the right of each church to govern itself, "call" its own "pastors", and

determine the course of church work. Paradoxically, Baptist churches commonly band together in county and state associations as well as national conventions which promote unity in work and doctrine. The reasoning which brought these associations into being was developed long ago in England:

"Early Baptists emphasized the need for a wider fellowship of the congregations through membership in what were called associations. This was based not only upon expediency but upon a conviction that such connectionalism was essential to express the church universal, a position clearly indicated in their early confessional statements" (Torbet, 1963, p. 31).

6. Salvation by faith alone through grace and the operation of the Holy Spirit. Hiscox' New Directory for Baptist Churches states, "justification includes the pardon of sin and the promise of eternal life on principles of righteousness...it is bestowed, not in consideration of any works of righteousness which we have done, but solely through faith in the Redeemer's blood" (quoted in Olbricht, 1972, p. 44). This process is usually called the "new birth" and it involves a direct action of the Holy Spirit upon the heart which results in a "personal sense of being saved" (North, 1977, p. 72). Once saved in this way, the vast majority of Baptists believe that one can never be lost.

< Points of Difference Between Baptists >

1. Differences between the Baptist bodies. There are some differences (usually small) between the 27 different Baptist bodies. The two largest groups are the Southern Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. (formerly the Northern Baptist Convention). The split between these two groups occurred in the mid 1800's over the issue of slavery. Today, issues of race, open communion, and especially ecumenism still separate the convention of the American Baptists from the Southern Baptists. American Baptists tend to be more liberal than Southern Baptists.

Free Will Baptist churches have over 250,000 members. Unlike other Baptists, they believe that Christ died for all, not just the elect, and that whosoever will may be saved.

The one million Baptists in the American Baptist Association (Landmarkers) hold strongly to the theory that the history of the Baptists can be traced back to the New Testament.

Primitive Baptists are heavily Calvinistic. They are the only Baptist group that has no

organization between churches--no administrative bodies or conventions.

Missionary Baptists emphasize missionary cooperation between churches.

2. Premillennialism. As the Armstrongs say in their book *The Baptists in America*, "One favorite topic of disputation among ultra-conservative Baptists is the doctrine of the millennium dealing with the second coming of Christ" (1979, p. 254). "Baptists generally hold to either the premillennial or the a-millennial position," but "one's position on this has never been a test of faith or fellowship" (North, 1977, p. 125).

3. Spiritual gifts. Some Baptists claim to have received charismatic gifts, while others deny that it is possible to do so today. Some Baptists seem to take a middle ground on this issue--allowing for the possibility of miraculous gifts today, but not placing much emphasis on them.

4. Predestination and other points of Calvinism. As noted earlier, the Free Will Baptists reject Calvin's teaching on predestination. Missionary Baptists tend to do the same. Within the ranks of Baptists, you might find several individuals who would disagree with two or three of Calvin's five main points. However, almost all would still hold to "once saved, always saved."

Cross-points

In the preceding section of the lesson it was shown that Baptists are in disagreement with each other on several points. In this section we will see that on points where they tend to be united, they are frequently at odds with the Bible. Citations of Baptist doctrine are taken from their manuals and confessions, or from statements of recognized Baptist scholars. The comparison of these citations with quotations from the Bible speaks for itself.

The Baptists

1. Baptism. "Baptism may not be essential to salvation, but it is essential to obedience." "...it possesses no power in itself to remit sin..." (Hiscox, *The New Directory of Baptist Churches*, pp. 125-26). "Baptism does not save the unbeliever" (C. H. Spurgeon in *Baptist*

The Bible

1. Baptism. "...let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins..." (Acts 2:38). "There is also an antitype which now saves us, namely baptism..." (I Peter 3:21). "...Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord"

Doctrines, p. 118). Baptism "is not necessary for salvation" (H. H. Hobbs, *Fundamentals of our Faith*, p. 17)

2. Church Membership. "In the Apostolic age when there was but 'one Lord, one faith, and one baptism,' and no differing denominations existed, the baptism of a convert by that very act constituted him a member of the church, and at once endowed him with all the rights and privileges of full membership. In that sense, 'baptism was the door into the church.' Now it is different...The churches, therefore, have candidates come before them, make their statement, give their 'experience,' and then their reception is decided by a vote of the members." (E. T. Hiscox, *The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches*, p. 22).

3. Justification. "Justification includes the pardon of sin and the promise of eternal life on principles of righteousness...it is bestowed, not in consideration of any works of righteousness which we have done, but solely through faith in the Redeemer's blood" (E. T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, pp. 551–52).

4. On the Possibility of Falling Away. "We believe the Scriptures teach that such as are truly regenerate, being born of the Spirit, will not utterly fall away and finally perish, but will endure to the end" (E. T. Hiscox, *The New Directory of Baptist*

(Acts 22:16). "He who believes and is baptized will be saved." (Mark 16:16a).

2. Church Membership. "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them." "And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:41, 47b). "For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body..." (I Corinthians 12:12–13a).

3. Justification. "A man is justified by works, and not by faith only" (James 2:24).

4. On the Possibility of Falling Away. "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance..." (Hebrews 6:4–6a). "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God" (Hebrews 3:12). (cf. Gal. 5:4).

5. Inherited Sin. "The soul who sins shall die, The son shall not bear the guilt of the

Churches, p. 554).

5. Inherited Sin. "Cain and Abel were infected with the death-dealing disease of sin, which they inherited from their parents and which has been passed on to every generation since. We are all sinners by inheritance, and try as we will, we cannot escape our birthright." (Billy Graham, *Peace with God*, p. 47). "All mankind are now sinners, not by constraint, but by choice; being by nature utterly void of that holiness required by the Law of God, positively inclined to evil..." (The New Hampshire Confession of Faith).

6. Lord's Supper. "Some churches observe it yearly, some quarterly, others more often." (J. T. Odle, *Church Members Handbook*, p. 24).

father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself" (Ezekiel 18:20). "But Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven'" (Matthew 19:14).

6. Lord's Supper. "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread... (Acts 20:7).

< Weak Points in the Baptist Faith >

1. The Name and Nature of the Baptist Church VERSUS the church of the New Testament. Many Baptists still claim to be able to trace the origin of their church back to the New Testament. All Baptists claim to rely on the scriptures as their sole basis of authority. Yet, the scriptures do not mention a Baptist church. No Christian is ever once called a "Baptist" in the New Testament. (John the baptist died before Jesus went to the cross. Thus, he could not have been a Christian.) The New Testament does not refer to church members "voting in" other church members, or to churches holding conventions or joining associations. Instruments of music, choirs, pageants, and secular-styled entertainment were never a part of any worship service in the church you can read about in the New Testament. If a church claims to trace its historic and

doctrinal origins to the New Testament, one should be able to read about that church in the New Testament. If one can't, the claim is proven to be weak.

2. Conventions VERSUS Church Autonomy. Baptist churches stand in self-contradiction when they maintain that each church is a self-ruling, self-determining body, and then turn around send representatives to a national convention. If each church is led by the Holy Spirit in determining its own beliefs and practices, why do churches send representatives to conventions which turn out policy statements on such issues? You can't have it both ways. Either the local church is sufficient for its own faith and work, or it must join with other churches.

Questions on the Baptists

1. Which group of Baptists is the largest in the United States?
2. What claims do Baptists sometimes make about "succession"?
3. In the early 1600's, two religious movements mixed in Amsterdam to originate the Baptist Church. What were these two religious movements?
4. Compare the positions of the Catholics, the Episcopalians and the Baptists on the issue of separation of church and state. What political and social forces contributed to the differing beliefs on this issue?
5. Name six distinctive points of Baptist belief.
6. What are some key points of doctrine or belief on which we would agree with Baptists?
7. What are some key issues over which Baptists themselves disagree?
8. Of the five points of Calvinism, which is probably most agreed upon by Baptists?
9. In your opinion, what is the biggest contradiction between Baptist doctrine and the Bible?

References on The Baptists

Armstrong, O. K. & Armstrong, M. (1979). *The baptists in America*. Garden City, NY:

Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Briggs, J. (1977). The English baptists. Eerdman's handbook to the history of Christianity. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company.

Davis, O. A. (1987). First baptist church history: Gadsden, Alabama. Tallahassee, FL: Father & Son Publishing.

Graham, B. (1953). Peace with God. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Higginbotham, M. & Higginbotham, R. (1987). Upon this rock I will build my church: Parker memorial baptist church 1887–1987. Anniston, AL: Higginbotham, Inc.

Mead, F. S. (1980). Handbook of denominations in the United States. Nashville: Abingdon.

Newton, L. D. (1957). Why I am a baptist. New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons.

North, S. (1977). Handbook on church doctrines. Oklahoma City, OK: OCC Bookstore.

Olbricht, O. D. (1972). Studies in denominational doctrine. Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing Company.

Porter, W. C. (unpublished handwritten ledger). Baptist church succession exploded.

Sprunger, K. L. (1977). Puritans and separatists. Eerdman's handbook to the history of Christianity. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company.

Torbet, R. G. (1963). A history of the baptists. Valley Forge: The Judson Press.

Yoder, J. H. & Kreider, A. (1977). The anabaptists. Eerdman's handbook to the history of Christianity. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Company.