

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A BAPTIST?

As with any Christian movement, the second law of thermodynamics seems to operate, and each succeeding generation becomes more homogenized with a generic brand of Christianity. Eventually, the distinctives are entirely lost. Surely a people not conscious of its own past is adrift without purpose. Believing that the diagnostic differences of Baptists have been gained at great price, we purpose to reaffirm those characteristics for the present generation.

Because of our distinctive of soul liberty, it is impossible to completely personalize a verbal portrait of a Baptist. However, in carefully analyzing the amazing story of our progenitors, it is possible to crystallize in outline form those biblical convictions that make Baptists delightfully different from other Christian fellowships. We now list those distinctives. This well-known acrostic is not original with the author, but it has proven helpful to many.

B - The BIBLE is our only rule of faith and practice.

Others in Christendom approach the Bible with differing views. Some read the Bible from THE ECCLESIASTICAL VIEW and believe that the church is the final authority and must interpret the Scriptures for parishioners. Some read the Bible from THE RATIONALISTIC VIEWPOINT and submit the Scriptures to reason as the final arbiter. Yet others read the Bible from THE MYSTICAL OUTLOOK and make "personal experience" the criteria of their interpretation. BAPTISTS, HOWEVER, BELIEVE THAT THE SOUL OF MAN MUST BOW TO THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD, MAKING THE CHURCH, REASON, AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE ALL SUBORDINATE.

A - Baptists believe in the AUTONOMY of each local [assembly].

The autonomy of the local [assembly] is seen throughout the New Testament. The local [assembly] serves in judgment of its own members (I Cor. 5:13). The local assembly must act in self-protection of the ordinances (I Cor. 11:23ff). The local body of believers must determine its own relationship with other churches (Acts 15:1-30). The local [assembly] is the final judge in discipline (Matt.18:15-17).

P - Baptists believe in the PRIESTHOOD of every believer.

Before God there is no division between any so-called laity and clergy. Every believer is to be a "holy priest," as he personally worships at the throne of God's grace (I Pet. 2:5). Every believer is to be a "royal priest," witnessing of his salvation (I Pet. 2:9).

T - Baptists observe TWO ORDINANCES:

1. Baptism.

Baptists are definite in their affirmation that baptism is not part of salvation; that it is only for believers, and thus is not for infants; and that it is by immersion. Our Lord in His Great Commission orders us to baptize, and the symbolic meaning makes the mode clear. Baptists believe that there is an order in the ordinances. Baptism is first, and it pictures our union with Christ in our death, burial, and resurrection unto newness of life as portrayed in immersion.

2. The Lord's Supper.

Baptists repudiate transubstantiation, which Rome invented at the Council of Trent. Baptists reject Luther's consubstantiation, for the Lord's Supper commemorates our Lord's absence and not His presence. Baptists refuse the Reformer's position that the Lord's Supper is a "means of grace." Baptists historically believe that the Lord's Supper is a memorial meal that serves as a reminder of the great sacrifice of our Saviour upon Calvary that has provided salvation. The Lord's Table, Baptists believe, is only for obedient believers, and it portrays our communion with Christ.

The ordinances then speak of our union and communion with the Savior.

Surely union must precede communion.

I - Baptists believe in INDIVIDUAL SOUL LIBERTY

When he speaks of "soul liberty," a Baptist refers to the competency of the human soul before God. This, of course, is not a competency of the soul in the sense of human self-sufficiency, but a competency of the soul under God. No governmental decrees, no dogma of any church, no declaration of any hierarchy, and no act of a priest can come between the individual and the Lord God. To attempt to deprive any soul of the privilege of direct access to God is tyranny. Man must respond to the claims of God by personal repentance and faith. Our Saviour would have us understand that "no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6), and thus direct access to God is the principle of the Christian life.

This distinctive affects and interplays with both the priesthood of the believer and the autonomy of the local [assembly]. Because Baptists believe in a regenerate church membership, individual believers can know the will of God and express their conscience by democratically voting on all matters of local [assembly] life.

S - Baptists have stood for SEPARATION

In actuality, this separation is threefold:

1. Personal separation FROM THE WORLD.

This is taught in passages such as Romans 12:1-2; I John 2:15-17; and II Corinthians 6:17,18.

2. Ecclesiastical separation FROM APOSTASY.

Baptists have always been considered "separatists," but tragically some who bear this precious name in our day are losing this blessed distinctive. Separation is set forth in II Corinthians 6:14-17, Romans 16:17, and II John 10-11.

3. POLITICAL SEPARATION of church and state (cf. Matt. 22:21)

T - Baptists hold to TWO OFFICERS in the local [assemblies]

This is set forth in Philippians 1:1, where we read of "bishops" and "deacons."

1. We observe that pastors in the New Testament are called by various titles: elders, bishops, preacher, and teachers. The pastor wears these various "hats" in the local assembly, as pastor, or shepherd, he feeds the flock; as elder he leads the body; and as bishop he oversees the work of the congregation. The titles of preacher and teacher are self-explanatory.

2. Deacons serve in the local [assembly] under the direction of the pastor to do the necessary tasks incumbent upon a congregation. This is suggested in Acts 6. The deacons are not a board to direct the pastor but are individual believers to assist him in his labour of love.

IN SUMMARY:

- B** The BIBLE is our only rule of faith and practice.
- A** Baptists believe in the AUTONOMY of each local assembly.
- P** Baptists believe in the PRIESTHOOD of every believer.
- T** Baptists observe TWO ORDINANCES:
- I** Baptists believe in INDIVIDUAL SOUL LIBERTY
- S** Baptists have stood for SEPARATION
- T** Baptists hold to TWO OFFICERS in the local [assemblies]