

Baptist Distinctives

“Out of all the available options, which church should I attend?”

People often choose a church based on the appearance of the building, the friendliness of the people, or the programs that are offered.

As important as these qualities are, other qualities surpass them all . . .

First and foremost, the church you choose should hold to the fundamentals of the Christian faith: the inspiration and authority of the Bible and Jesus’ virgin birth, eternal deity, substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, and literal return. Bible-teaching churches of all varieties hold these primary beliefs as essential truths.

But beyond these fundamentals, there are specific teachings that set one church apart from the others.

Baptists are distinguished from other Christian groups by specific Biblical distinctives. The name “Baptist” identifies people who hold those distinctives. These Baptist distinctives relate to questions of vital interest today. For example, Does absolute truth exist, or are all belief systems relative? Who controls the program, property, finances, staffing, and doctrinal position of a local church? How does being a representative of God on earth affect the believer’s marriage, work, or relationship to government and society? Does God dispense His grace through religious rituals? Should a free society “legislate righteousness”? Is it right to “judge” anything about another person? Is there a Biblical model for church leadership? What is the proper relationship between church and state?

Why Is It Important to Know the Baptist Distinctives?

They are Biblical! They are part of God’s truth as revealed in His Word.

The knowledge of these facts provides practical benefits relevant to today.

1. Such knowledge enables one to select a church that is faithful to these Biblical truths

2. It demonstrates the meaning, worth, and significance of the name "Baptist."

General titles that lack identification, such as "Christian" or "Christ" and churches labeled "community" or "nondenominational," leave much room for ambiguities and misunderstandings. The name "Baptist" is understood through its distinctives. Baptists should be confident that when their name is heard, no ambiguities are left in defining what they stand for. Certain Biblical distinctives have distinguished their doctrinal position.

3. It helps members maintain the Baptist position of their church, preventing digression into unscriptural positions.

Each member of a Baptist church needs to know what a Biblical Baptist individual and a Biblical Baptist church does and then do these things faithfully.

How Did These Distinctives Originate?

Baptists arrived at these distinctives through careful study of the Bible. That is why these teachings are more precisely called the Biblical distinctives of Baptists rather than Baptist distinctives.

These teachings emerged as Baptist distinctives because individual Baptist churches have consistently and independently held to them, not because some group of Baptist leaders composed the list and then imposed the distinctives on local churches.

Church groups other than Baptists have held some of the Baptist distinctives, and one may even find churches that hold all of the distinctives but do not call themselves Baptist. Such groups are "baptistic," but for some reason they choose not to be identified as Baptists. On the other hand, some churches naming themselves "Baptist" are not truly Baptist because they no longer hold the historic Baptist beliefs or even the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

Baptists are people of the Book above all else. And Baptists enjoy a priceless heritage of generations who have exalted God's Son our Savior and have proclaimed God's inspired Word.

What Are the Eight Baptist Distinctives?

These teachings may be remembered by associating them with the letters that form the word "BAPTISTS."

Biblical Authority

The Bible is the final authority in all matters of belief and practice because the Bible is inspired by God and bears the absolute authority of God Himself. Whatever the Bible affirms, Baptists accept as true. No human opinion or decree of any church group can override the Bible. Even creeds and confessions of faith, which attempt to articulate the theology of Scripture, do not carry Scripture's inherent authority.

2 Timothy 3:15-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Peter 1:20, 21

Autonomy of the Local Church

The local church is an independent body accountable to the Lord Jesus Christ, the head of the church. All human authority for governing the local church resides within the local church itself. Thus the church is autonomous, or self-governing. No religious hierarchy outside the local church may dictate a church's beliefs or practices. Autonomy does not mean isolation. A Baptist church may fellowship with other churches around mutual interests and in an associational tie, but a Baptist church cannot be a "member" of any other body. Colossians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, 19, 23

Priesthood of the Believer

"Priest" is defined as "one authorized to perform the sacred rites of a religion, especially as a mediatory agent between humans and God." Every believer today is a priest of God and may enter into His presence in prayer directly through our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. No other mediator is needed between God and people. As priests, we can study God's Word, pray for others, and offer spiritual worship to God. We all have equal access to God—whether we are a preacher or not.

1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 5:9, 10

Two Ordinances

The local church should practice two ordinances: (1) baptism of believers by immersion in water, identifying the individual with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, and (2) the Lord's Supper, or communion, commemorating His death for our sins.

Matthew 28:19, 20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-32

Individual Soul Liberty

Every individual, whether a believer or an unbeliever, has the liberty to choose what he believes is right in the religious realm. No one should be forced to assent to any belief against his will. Baptists have always opposed religious persecution. However, this liberty does not exempt one from responsibility to the Word of God or from accountability to God Himself.

Romans 14:5, 12; 2 Corinthians 4:2; Titus 1:9

Saved, Baptized Church Membership

Local church membership is restricted to individuals who give a believable testimony of personal faith in Christ and have publicly identified themselves with Him in believer's baptism. When the members of a local church are believers, a oneness in Christ exists, and the members can endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Acts 2:41-47; 1 Corinthians 12:12; 2 Corinthians 6:14; Ephesians 4:3

Two Offices

The Bible mandates only two offices in the church—pastor and deacon. The three terms—"pastor," "elder," and "bishop," or "overseer"—all refer to the same office. The two offices of pastor and deacon exist within the local church, not as a hierarchy outside or over the local church.

1 Timothy 3:1-13; Acts 20:17-38; Philippians 1:1

Separation of Church and State

God established both the church and the civil government, and He gave each its own distinct sphere of operation. The government's purposes are outlined in Romans 13:1-7 and the church's purposes in Matthew 28:19 and 20. Neither should control the other, nor should there be an alliance between the two. Christians in a free society can properly influence government toward righteousness, which is not the same as a denomination or group of churches controlling the government.

Matthew 22:15-22; Acts 15:17-29

What sets one church apart from all the others? We have seen that it is the church's distinctive beliefs that set it apart from all others and that Baptists in general hold to some convictions that make them different from all other groups. Regular Baptist churches will continue to hold to the Baptist distinctives because these distinctives are historically Biblical. They are relevant to the issues facing contemporary society and the church. So when "shopping" for a church, look for the name "Baptist" and then take a closer look to make sure that church is upholding the Biblical Baptist distinctives.

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