

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES

By Rev. Phillip David Mosher ¹ © 2007 (Adapted from my book: *This We Believe*)

Definition and Introduction

A distinctive is a unique characteristic that makes a person or thing different. In this section we will cover what distinguishes Baptists from other churches.

A careful study of church history reveals that autonomous local churches have existed since the birth of the Church.² During the fourth and fifth centuries, when the Roman government began to accept Christianity as another approved religion, the Catholic Church was born and grew to such power that popes had the authority to appoint and bless kings. During this time, there were Christian leaders and local congregations that did not agree nor cooperate with the Catholic Church. The Catholic leadership called those Christians and churches “Ana-Baptists,”³ a name that indicates that these followers of Christ were *re-baptizers* who did not accept infant baptism or the baptism of unbelievers as practiced in the Catholic Church. True converts to Jesus Christ who had experienced baptism as children were re-baptized as a testimony of their faith in Christ. Ana-Baptists (means re-baptizers) were persecuted by the Catholic Church for their beliefs and practices, and this forced them to live in hiding or on the outskirts of the Roman Empire. During the Reformation, some of the Reformers persecuted the Baptists because of their beliefs about baptism, local church government, and separation of church and state. Today there are churches who use the name “Baptist” that do not hold to these historical distinctives.

Throughout history Baptists have not cooperated with those who were for a hierarchy and a uniting of local churches under one central leadership. These distinctives are the Baptists’ reaction to Catholic beliefs and practices. Later, their firm commitment to these truths brought them into conflict with the Reformers.

The foundational principle of Baptist Distinctives is a belief in “soul liberty.” Though there were differences among Baptists, historians have discovered that the following distinctives were commonly held by these followers of Jesus Christ.

Baptist Distinctives

1) The Scriptures are Final in Authority

The Word of God is the only means by which man can know of the saving grace of Jesus Christ and of the will of God (John 20:31; Hebrews 1:1-2; Psalm 119:9,105). The Bible is the Christian’s *only* rule for faith and practice and is, therefore, his only and final authority (2 Timothy 2:15-16; 3:16-17).

2) Local Church Membership Must Be Comprised of Regenerated People

The local church is the outward manifestation of the universal church (Acts 8:1; Revelation 1:4). To be a member of the universal church, which is the bride and body

¹ Adapted from the author’s book: *This We Believe, an In-depth Look at Bible Doctrine*

² *A History of Christianity*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette, pub. Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., © 1953

³ Bishop Stephen of Rome used this title in 253 AD, from *A Manual of Church History* by Albert Hebray Newman, p 270

of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 5:21-32; Colossians 1:24), one must believe (trust in) the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41, 44, 47b; Romans 10:9-13). Therefore, for the local church to be a faithful representation of the universal church, it should receive only those people into its membership who give testimony of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (those who are true members of the universal church).

As a condition for local church membership, Baptists require baptism by immersion as a testimony of one's salvation experience (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 2:41, 44, 47b).

3. The Ordinances of a Local Church

Baptist churches do not use the word "sacrament" because it originally meant something one does to merit grace from God. An ordinance is an act done in obedience to a command of our Lord. Baptists believe that there are two and only two ordinances to be observed by the local church until Christ comes for His Bride.

a. Baptism: When one repents of his/her sins and believes in Jesus Christ as Savior, that person should, in obedience to our Lord's command (Matthew 28:19-20), give testimony of his/her faith to the world through the ordinance of baptism. This baptism is by immersion. The Greek word βαπτίζω [baptidzo] means to wash, dip, or to cover wholly with a fluid. Historically New Testament baptism comes from the Jewish purification rites, which were a cleansing by immersion in water. Historical church documents and archaeological findings testify that the early churches immersed. Sprinkling and pouring came later. Paul said that Christian baptism is a picture of the believer's association with Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:1-5), and a testimony to the fact that the person has new life in Christ.⁴

b. The Lord's Supper: Believers in Christ are to observe the Lord's Supper until He comes to take them to Glory. This memorial service is done in obedience to the Lord's command (Luke 22:19 with 1 Corinthians 11:23-34). The unleavened bread is a symbol of Christ's sinless body (the incarnation) that was given for us. The wine is a symbol of His blood that was shed for the remission of our sins. By partaking of the Lord's Table, the believer is remembering the Lord's death and giving testimony that he/she has committed his/her life to the Savior.

4. The Priesthood of the Believer

Every believer is a priest unto God and has a right to come boldly to God's throne to confess his/her sins, make his/her petitions, and give praise to God through Jesus Christ, the Christian's High Priest and Advocate (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:14-16; 1 John 2:1-2; 1 Peter 2:9; and Revelation 1:6). Jesus is our only mediator.

5. Separation of Church and State⁵

The Church has a definite job to do: Evangelize the whole world, instruct people in the Word of God, and teach people to obey it (Matthew 28:19-20). Government has a

⁴ An excellent work on baptism was produced by Johannas Warns, and translated by G. H. Lang in 1957, *Baptism, Studies in the Original Christian Baptism*. Those with any doubts about the biblical and historical foundation of the Baptists on this subject need to read this book.

⁵ Not to be confused with the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, which does not set forth a separation but a respect for religion and forbids government to establish a state church. It places no restrictions upon the church but guarantees her full liberty.

different responsibility, which is to maintain law and order in society (Romans 13:1-7). A Christian is admonished to show respect for and pay tribute to his government as a citizen of the state and to minister unto God as a citizen of heaven (Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13). Never is the church to assume the God-given role of the state, nor is government to assume or interfere with the role of the Church. When government oversteps God's limits, Baptists believe their first responsibility is to obey God and that we must be ready to suffer persecution (2 Chronicles 22:10 – 23:15; Daniel 3 & 6; Acts 4:19-20).

6. The Autonomy of the Local Church

The local church is to be self-governed and is to have no head over her except her true Head, the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:15-16; Colossians 1:18). The government of the primitive church was "very simple."⁶ History shows that Baptist churches have been congregational in government, though some have experienced strong leadership. We believe that God's will is revealed through His Word and the unity of His people, not through an ecclesiastical body or an individual such as an overseeing bishop.

The Autonomy of the Local Church and Christian Liberty

The autonomy of the local church has already been addressed as a Baptist Distinctive. This autonomy is revealed throughout the New Testament and is a fundamental belief of true Baptists. The practice of this doctrine can cause misunderstandings and conflicts between churches. Those churches that are part of a large denomination such as Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, have established beliefs, practices, and values that are part of a historical past or that come from a hierarchy.⁷ However, a church that truly believes in and practices autonomy does not have this background influence over their faith and practice.

Though we believe that the Holy Scriptures are our only rule for faith and practice and that Jesus is the head of the church, we must be honest and admit that not all the issues we face today are clearly covered in the Bible. For this very reason the Jews had their Talmud and other commentaries on the Law. For example the law required the Jews to circumcise their baby boys on the eighth day, but it also required that they do no work on the Sabbath. The religious leaders placed these two requirements in balance and concluded that a boy should be circumcised even if the eighth day was a Sabbath.⁸ Our heavenly Father knew these two laws could cause a conflict, but He did not choose to clarify the matter.

There exist several subjects that are not addressed in the Bible, like music, dress codes,⁹ order of services in the church, Bible translations, etc. There is no God-ordained hierarchy to dictate a solution. God left this in the hands of His people within the context of the autonomous local church. The local church has the divine right to establish standards in areas that are not clearly addressed in the Bible.

⁶ Sell, H. T. (1998, c1906). *Studies in Early Church History*, Willow Grove, PA: Woodlawn Electronic Publishing, from the chapter on "the Church in the Catacombs"

⁷ As is shown in the chapter on Calvinism in my book (*This We Believe*), many of these traditions have their roots in the teachings of Augustine, a Platonist.

⁸ John 7:22-23

⁹ The Word of God does give us two principles to follow: 1) Modesty; 1 Timothy 3:9, and 2) A distinction in dress that defines sex; Deuteronomy 22:5. Beyond these how we dress is an open subject. 3) I believe church music should be different from that of the world, Romans 12:1-2.

The problem comes when a local church tries to export their views, as though they were inspired by the Holy Spirit and were equal to the Scriptures, and to apply them to all of Christianity or other autonomous local churches similar to itself. The Apostle Paul dealt with this in Romans 14:1 to 15:13 and 1 Corinthians 8; 9:19-27; and 10:23-33. In these passages, Paul addressed Christian liberties setting forth the following principles:

- 1) We should respect the beliefs and practices of others and should not judge or condemn them (beliefs and practices that are not clearly covered in the Bible). Romans 14:1-18
- 2) We should not practice our liberties when doing so will weaken or destroy other Christians. Romans 14:13-22
- 3) We should not allow the practice of our liberties to destroy our testimony for the Lord Jesus before a lost world. Romans 14:13-22, and 1 Corinthians 8 and 9:19-27 ¹⁰
- 4) We should accept and respect our brother (sister) in Christ and his practices, showing love. Romans 15:1-13
- 5) Our goal should always be what is good for others and the glory of God, not allowing secondary issues to destroy the work of the Lord. 1 Corinthians 10:23-33

To illustrate, let us imagine a church that to facilitate the public reading of the Scriptures decides to use a specific translation of the Bible in its services, placing copies in the pews and recommending that its regular attendees bring that translation to church functions. An error and offense occurs when that local church starts to find fault with other churches because they are using a different translation.¹¹

Though I have very conservative views on music in church services and personally believe that some of this “contemporary” music is not appropriate in regular church services, I must admit that this is one of those issues that are not clearly addressed in the Scriptures and the above principals apply.¹²

This material may be copied and used without contacting the author. It may not be altered without his permission.

¹⁰ In my book see the chapter on “The Biblical Role of Government” in the appendix. I believe this is what Paul and Peter meant when admonishing us to obey the governors over us.

¹¹ Here I am not getting into the “King James Only” debate, which I believe illustrates this point and is wrong, causing uncalled for damage to the church in general.

¹² In my book see “Causes of Conflicts” in the appendix, also footnote # 8 above.

“The things which are.” Revelation 1:19

The Seven Letters from Jesus to Local Churches are a picture of the church throughout this dispensation

In Revelation Chapters 2-3

Ephesus - Desirable

The Church that loved (first 100 years)

Smyrna - Crushed

The Church that suffered (150 to 312)

Pergamum - Exalted

The Church that compromised (312 to 500)

Thyatira - Continual Sacrifice

The Church of idolatry (500 to 1300, Dark Ages)

Sardis - The Red One

The dead Church that lost those with life (1300 to 1600)

Philadelphia - Brotherly Love

The Church of opportunity (1600 to Rapture)

Laodicea - Justice by the People

The Church satisfied with itself (after WW-II to Second Coming)

(The dates given are approximate.)

© Copyright 1996-2010
by Phillip David Mosher

