

Our Baptist DISTINCTIVES

Baptists are:

- members of the whole Christian family who stress the experience of personal salvation through faith in Jesus, symbolized both in baptism and the Lord's Supper.
- those who under the Lordship of Jesus Christ have bonded together in free local congregations, together seeking to obey Christ in faith and in life.
- those who follow the authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice.
- those who have claimed religious liberty for themselves and all people.
- those who believe that the Great Commission to take the Gospel to the whole world is the responsibility of the whole membership.

(Statement Made by the Commission on Baptist Heritage of the Baptist World Alliance, July 1989) *The Baptist Identity*, Walter Shurden, pp. 5-6)

DISTINCTIVES THAT LEAD TO DIVERSITY

Perhaps you have noticed that not all Baptist churches are alike. This is because Baptists share some **DISTINCTIVES** that are unique to us as a people, **DISTINCTIVES** that inherently lead to some diversity.

Bible Freedom

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (**II Timothy 3:16-17 [NIV]**).

Since God's Word is the only completely reliable and truthful authority, we accept the Bible as our manual for living. Our first question when faced with a decision is "What does the Bible say?" We practice daily Bible reading, Bible study, and Bible memorization. The Bible is the basis for all we believe.

Baptists believe that the Bible is God's recorded Word to us. It was written by inspired individuals, under the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is our authority for Christian faith and practice. It reveals the character of God, His plan of redemption for humankind and principles for holy living.

Though Baptists believe that the Bible is true in every way and contains **THE** truth, Baptists have acknowledged that human understanding of the truth is never complete. Therefore, Baptists have historically resisted efforts to have imposed upon them rigid, inflexible interpretations of Scripture which they themselves may not believe.

Ironically, the Trinity Baptist Church began in 1953 over the issue of Scripture interpretation as evidenced in the following paragraph from Trinity's historical records: "A number of this group had previously withdrawn their attendance from the regular church services at the First Baptist Church because they did not agree with the practices, policies, and *dogmatic scriptural interpretations* of the pastor. After many weeks of discussions between each other in informal

gatherings, this group revealed their serious desire to seek an atmosphere for worship in which harmony, fellowship, and *a more tolerant interpretation of the scriptures would prevail.*"

At Trinity we affirm the freedom of each individual to interpret Scripture. Though we are free, we remind each other that our freedom is not without responsibility. Bible freedom does not mean that every belief about the Bible is accurate. Bible freedom stresses that each **person** must wrestle with the text him/herself and seek to live out the text in a manner pleasing to God.

Soul Freedom

Some groups have developed a hierarchical clergy who interpret the Scriptures for the laity and who claim a more direct line to God than others. Traditionally, Baptists have resisted these practices, practices that have led some groups to adopt creeds of confession before membership into the church or denomination is accepted. Baptists, however, are a non-creedal people.

To say that Baptists are a non-creedal people does not mean we do not embrace confessions contained in creeds, such as the Apostle's creed. What it means is that no creed can adequately summarize what we as Baptists believe and how we should live. Only the Bible can do this. As has been mentioned, it is the freedom and responsibility of each Baptist to interpret the Scriptures. Obviously such freedom can be abused and sometimes leads to conflict. It is the main reason there is so much diversity among Baptists. However, not to embrace Bible Freedom leads to dogmatism and the danger of a few imposing interpretations of Scripture upon the masses. Baptists are free! If we err, we should be free to err ourselves and not bound to err by following another's interpretation of Scripture.

Therefore, it is each person's right and responsibility to deal with God, free of creeds, free of interference of clergy, or any other individual or group.

Such a distinctive has often been called The Priesthood of the Believer. "According to our belief, all believers are priests and may directly confess their sins, express their praise, and ask for guidance." (George W. McDaniel, *The*

People Called Baptist, p. 47)

Church Freedom

Another reason Baptist churches are so diverse is that we share a common distinctive, church freedom. Church freedom is often referred to as the autonomy of the local church. Every Baptist church is autonomous. Because Baptists are free, we are free as congregations of believers to make our own decisions regarding every aspect of our ministry as we are so lead by Christ. No other individual or grouping of individuals, no other church or grouping of churches has authority over the local Baptist church.

For every Baptist Church, Christ is the governing authority. Free Baptists should be faithful Baptists, faithful to listen and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all its affairs. Therefore, the church government of Baptists is congregational in its makeup. That means that the opinion of each and every member is important. Decisions are made democratically. No one person is the authority. No single group is the authority. Church polity is decided as a congregation.

Thus, each member has equal rights and shared responsibility for the direction of the church. This does not mean that the majority is always right. It does mean that the minority voice will always have an opportunity to be heard.

Church freedom means that at Trinity, the church is free to call its own pastor and other staff members, determine its style of worship, decide who is eligible for membership, elect its own officers, plan its own mission strategy, and solve its own problems.

Baptists do not claim that a congregational form of government is the only good way for a church to exist or that it is a perfect form of church government. What Baptists claim is that such a form of church government allows for us the most freedom under the Lordship of Christ to act as a congregation in ways we feel led by Christ.

Religious Freedom

Baptists were prominent in the founding of America and in helping develop some of the relational guidelines that developed between the government and the church. Many people came to America because they believed so strongly in being able to worship God without governmental guidelines, coercion, or pressure. Baptists were among those who helped carve the first amendment of the constitution of the United States: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Having explained the other freedoms of Baptists, Bible freedom, soul freedom, and church freedom, it should not be surprising that Baptists extend their desire for religious freedom to the government by denouncing all coerced or official religious endorsements by the same. Such does not mean that Baptists do not want a Christian government or Christian leaders. It does mean that Baptists reject any government using its position to interfere with how we worship or whether one worships at all.

Though this Baptist distinctive has been jeopardized in recent years by a "new breed" of Baptists, historically Baptists have been champions in the fight for the separation of church and state. Because no group can have all the truth, we do not advocate the church being above the state. Because we believe that Christ is the truth, we do not believe in being under the state. Because we believe that an arrangement to co-exist alongside the state could compromise our purpose, that model is rejected, too. We are free. We are free to influence and free to worship. We do not want the lines blurred so we believe that existing alongside the state is right and Biblical.

It is important for Baptists in the local church to be aware of our history on this matter, to affirm the separation of church and state, as it is a freedom that has been jeopardized in recent years. It is not only a freedom for us, it is a fundamental freedom we espouse for all people, a freedom of religion, a freedom for religion and even a freedom from religion.