

# What is a Baptist?

by James (Jimmy) T. Draper, Jr.  
October, 2000

Baptists are people of a remarkable history, a resilient spirit, and a responsible commitment. Many things have been written and spoken in recent years about these people called Baptists. But what is a Baptist? What essentials define the individual and the corporate body of Baptists? Let me suggest some characteristics of a Baptist in today's world that are consistent with what a Baptist has been historically.

**1** A Baptist is an individual who has experienced salvation through personal faith in Jesus Christ. Baptists do not believe in proxy faith, where a priest or any other person mediates between the individual and God (1 Tim. 2:5). Every individual must come to the time in life when he/she receives Jesus Christ as personal Savior. This is the basic building block in the making of a Baptist.

**2** A Baptist is one who acknowledges the sufficiency of Scripture. Such an individual believes the Bible is God's truth without any error. That is the foundation of all we do and believe. God's Word clearly declares, *All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works* (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Baptists have always recognized and often drawn up "confessions of faith." These have been and continue to be guides in understanding the basic beliefs of Baptists, but no confession has a creedal power over any individual or church. God's Word is our final authority and we recognize its sufficiency.

**3** A Baptist is one who acknowledges the Lordship of Jesus Christ. All of our worship and service centers on Him. *He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell* (Col. 1:18-19).

We also recognize that the Bible testifies of Jesus Christ and is our source of understanding of His Person, Presence and relationship with us. All we teach and experience regarding Jesus Christ must be consistent with the revealed truth of God in the Scripture. In *The Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, E.Y. Mullins states: "Jesus Christ is the crown of the revelation recorded in the Scriptures. In him all is unified. The lordship of

Christ is a fundamental Baptist teaching. In all our doctrine of the Bible we seek to express the meaning of Christ *as disclosed therein* " (author's emphasis in italics) (p. 143). All of our experience with Jesus is validated and confirmed by the truth of the written Word of God.

**4** A Baptist is Trinitarian in his/her understanding of God. We believe the Bible teaches that God is eternally One in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each is fully God, yet God is One. There is no division in the godhead and no Person of the godhead is less than fully divine. God is Father, Who created the world and all that is in it, Who planned our redemption from before the foundations of the world, and Who has a wonderful plan and purpose for each of our lives.

God is Son, even our Lord Jesus Christ, Who became the perfect sacrifice for our sins. He was fully divine, yet fully human. This is a mystery beyond our comprehension, but we know that He was everything man needed in God and everything God desired for man. His virgin birth, sinless life, vicarious death, and promised return is foundational to our faith.

God is Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ said, *I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever; even the Spirit of truth; ... I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you* (John 14:16-18). The Holy Spirit is the very Presence of God in our midst today. He lives within us and guides us in all we do as He leads us to understand the depths of God's Word. His purpose is to magnify and glorify Jesus Christ, and our experience with Him will always be consistent to the Scripture.

**5** A Baptist is one who recognizes the autonomy of the local church. There is no such thing as "The Baptist Church." There are only local Baptist churches. The local Baptist Church is "Baptist Headquarters." No individual or entity outside of the local Baptist church has any authority or control over that congregation. Each congregation is free and empowered to minister as it sees the will of God for its ministry and mission. A Baptist church, like first-century New Testament churches, is a local independent body of born-again baptized believers joined together in Christ for worship and ministry in their community and around the world.

There is no hierarchy in our denomination that has authority over the local church. While Baptists do believe that the New Testament teaches that all the redeemed of all ages belong to the church eternal, we know that the references in the New Testament to the church primarily refer to a local body of believers, who have

voluntarily come together to carry out the mission of the church.

To the church God has committed two ordinances, the Lord's Supper and baptism. Neither of these ordinances are sacraments. Neither have power to transmit saving grace. Both are to be preceded by acceptance of Christ by faith as Savior and Lord. Baptism precedes participation in the Lord's Supper. Neither baptism nor the Lord's Supper are essential to salvation, but both are vital to a full and meaningful Christian life. The church is to keep faithfully these ordinances until Jesus comes again. Both the Lord's Supper and baptism are symbols of our faith and testify of the work and ministry of Jesus Christ. As the name Baptist implies, we insist upon baptism by immersion of the body of the believer in water.

**6** A Baptist is one who believes in the command of the Great Commission and has a deep commitment to evangelism and world missions. The church exists as a place of nurture and worship, but it is also a place of witness and outreach to the ends of the earth. The marching orders for the church are clearly seen in Matt. 28:18-20. A Baptist is one who has accepted that challenge and assignment from our Lord Jesus Christ. We understand that our Lord Jesus Christ has the world in His heart and the closer we draw to Him, the more missionary we will become.

**7** A Baptist is one who fully advocates and supports the cause of religious liberty and freedom for all. We believe that the church and state must maintain separate identities and functions for the good of both. Throughout Christian history, whenever religion has controlled the state or the state has controlled religion, both have been corrupted, and religious and civil liberty have suffered.

We do not believe, however, that this truth prohibits the involvement of Christians in public life. Christians must be involved in public life at every level. Individual Christians and Christian institutions should seek to influence government at every level in the realm of public morals, but must not seek to control the state. Neither should the state seek to control people's personal religious practices or the expression of organized religion.

Throughout their history, Baptists have stood as guardians of religious liberty and this understanding of the distinctive roles of the church and state. Americans need to know, and all of us need to remember that the constitutional rights protecting freedom of religion are due largely to the impact of Baptists from colonial days to the present. Baptists, including John Leland, a preacher from Virginia, and James Manning, the president of

a Baptist college, Rhode Island College (later Brown University), figured prominently in the ratification of the United States Constitution.

James Madison introduced amendments into the Constitution to safeguard religious liberty after conferring with John Leland. When James Madison died, one who eulogized him declared: "The credit of adopting the Constitution of the United States properly belonged to a Baptist clergyman, formerly of Virginia, by the name of Leland ..." (*The Baptist People*, by P.E. Burroughs, p. 65).

What is a Southern Baptist? This question is a natural outcome of our first inquiry. We as Southern Baptists embrace the uniqueness and essentials listed above, but move further into the Southern Baptist distinctive of cooperation. We do what we do together. We do what we do together voluntarily. No one coerces us. We are bound together in what my predecessor, James L. Sullivan, called a "Rope of Sand with Strength of Steel." To cooperate means that we gather around the essentials listed above and put aside our personal agendas to accomplish the mandate of God for our lives. While there are many other things that Baptists might "believe" or endless convictions we might "hold," those listed above are the bedrock issues that have set Baptists apart through the centuries.

E.Y. Mullins concludes his article in *The Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* with the following thoughts under the heading *The only basis of unity*: "The one sure and certain road to agreement among all Christians is obedience to the New Testament teachings in all matters of doctrine, polity, worship, and life. To seek unity of view on any other basis is in effect an effort to uproot the fundamental principle of evangelical Christianity - the finality and authority of the Bible. Loyalty to the Bible would very soon destroy any form of unity otherwise established. For Baptists, then, it seems a hopeless undertaking to seek unity of view on any other principle. If the Bible is final and authoritative, why set forth plans of unity based on expediency or mutual concession of vital teachings? They can be only roundabout paths to new issues so long as the Bible remains authoritative and final. Baptists long and pray for complete agreement among Christians of all names. They are second to none in their desires in this direction. They especially desire that it be accomplished on a stable and lasting basis. They firmly believe that the Bible alone is such a basis" (p. 143).

These essentials compose a tapestry which reveals a pattern that uniquely describes a Baptist. We are a believers' church that voluntarily cooperates around the authority and sufficiency of God's Word in all matters

necessary for life "in Christ."

*James T. (Jimmy ) Draper, Jr. is president of LifeWay Christian Resources.*

*This article reprinted by permission from [SBCLife](#)*