

LESSON ONE

Who in the World Are Baptists, Anyway?

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURES

Genesis 1:26-27; Matthew 16:13-17; John 3:1-16; Ephesians 2:1-19

FOCAL TEXT

Ephesians 2:1-19

MAIN IDEA

“The doctrine of the soul’s competency in religion under God is the historical significance of the Baptists”¹ and means that God provides each person with the ability and freedom to make decisions in matters relating to God.

STUDY AIM

To summarize some basic biblical understandings that are the source of who Baptists are, what they believe, and how they live

QUICK READ

This lesson provides an introduction to the biblical basis for principles that describe what it means to be a Baptist Christian with a primary emphasis on soul competency before God.

Baptists frequently make the headlines and the newscasts. Some of the stories are positive, such as those about Baptist relief efforts in the midst of disasters. Unfortunately, other stories paint Baptists as “feuding, fussing, and fighting” most of the time. People who are not Baptists wonder, “Who in the world are Baptists, anyway?” In fact, a number of Baptists seem to wonder the same thing!

To further complicate matters, people with very diverse beliefs and actions wear the name “Baptist.” Baptists can be found in various political parties in our nation. Baptists advocate a wide variety of views on social and moral issues. Baptists hold differing convictions about theology and interpretation of the Bible.

So what makes a Baptist a Baptist? And why are Baptists so diverse? Those are difficult questions without simple answers. In fact, no single doctrine or belief can describe what it means to be a Baptist. Much like a recipe, a combination of doctrines and beliefs actually goes into describing a Baptist. And people hold different ideas about what should go into the Baptist mix. Yet most Baptists agree on the core ingredients. This lesson will explore the biblical foundation for a number of these basic Baptist beliefs, recognizing that such a brief space provides only for a limited discussion.

Soul Competency (Ephesians 2:1-7)

The Holy Spirit led Paul, the great missionary of the first century, to write to the Christians at Ephesus about their life in Christ. He emphasized that apart from Christ there is no salvation from sin and death. Paul also stressed that each person possesses the capacity to decide whether to follow Jesus or not. He indicated that the Ephesian Christians through faith in Christ had determined to leave the ways of the world (Ephesians 2:2–3), to respond to God’s love in Christ, and to live lives worthy of heaven (Eph. 2:4–7). Throughout this letter Paul indicated that the Ephesians had choices to make,

Ephesians 2:1-19 (NIV)

¹As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ²in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. ⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

¹¹Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men)—¹²remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

¹⁹Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household . . .

such as his appeal to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (Eph. 4:1).

Paul based his assumption that the Ephesians possessed the ability to respond to his appeals solidly on the writings of the Old Testament and the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Genesis reveals that God created human beings with the freedom of choice (Genesis 1:26–27). The Old Testament prophets called on the people of Israel to turn from their wicked ways to God’s ways. Jesus’ initial preaching urged people to repent. Moreover, Jesus asked Peter to make a personal decision regarding who Jesus was (Matthew 16:13–17). These appeals for people to decide for God would be cruel farces if human beings did not have the capacity to choose to respond.

Therefore a basic Baptist belief is “the doctrine of the soul’s competency in religion under God.”² This belief is not an emphasis on human self-sufficiency. Rather, it stresses that the ability to decide—that is, the

George W. Truett and Religious Liberty

Many historians consider George W. Truett, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas from 1898 to 1944, as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, pastor in Southern Baptist life. Never provincial in his outlook, he served as president of both the Southern Baptist Convention and of the Baptist World Alliance. He also gave strong support to the Baptist General Convention of Texas and to institutions related to the convention. When Truett died, the entire Dallas community expressed love and appreciation for him. City and county offices were closed in his honor, and a huge crowd attended his funeral.

In 1920 Truett delivered one of the most famous sermons in Baptist history from the east steps of the Capitol in Washington, D. C. His theme was religious liberty. In the sermon, he quoted Jesus’ statement, “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21, KJV). He then declared: “That utterance, once and for all, marked the divorcement of church and state.”³

competency of the soul—is a gift from God. Thus we have freedom of choice because God has so gifted us. Furthermore, the choice cannot be delegated. Each person must decide for herself or himself to follow Jesus or not. No one can make that choice for another. Baptists declare that no one should try to coerce another in a decision for Christ. Neither church nor government, Baptists believe, has any right to attempt to force a religious decision on anyone. Certainly Baptists seek to persuade people to follow Christ, but they realize that such commitment is a voluntary individual decision.

Many Baptists believe that the doctrine of soul competency is basic to other Baptist beliefs. It relates to many other doctrines that Baptists cherish, in a sense tying them together.

Salvation by Grace Through Faith (Eph. 2:8-10)

The Bible teaches that salvation is in Christ by grace through faith alone. This certainly relates to soul competency. Paul stated to the Ephesians: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). Baptists believe in the deity and lordship of Jesus Christ. Baptists insist that salvation from sin and death to forgiveness and life is only found in Jesus Christ, who declared, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

God’s grace—God’s unmerited love for lost humanity—led God to send his Son to be our Savior. As Jesus told Nicodemus, the Jewish leader who came to him by night, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Baptists believe that it is grace/faith plus nothing that results in salvation—not grace/faith plus good works, or church membership, or baptism, or sacrament, or anything else. People are free to believe or not to believe in Jesus as personal Lord and Savior. Those who believe in Jesus as Savior pass from death that is the result of sin to eternal and abundant life that is the result of faith in

Christ. Baptists declare also that this salvation is secure for eternity in Christ.

Each believer is to express through believer's baptism, another major belief of Baptists, that he or she has been made "alive with Christ" (Eph. 2:5). Both words are important: *believer's* and *baptism*. Baptists declare that only those who have personally made a decision to believe in Christ should be baptized because only through belief do we pass from death to life as is symbolized in baptism. That is why Baptists reject infant baptism. The word *baptize* means to immerse. Therefore, Baptists immerse believers as a beautiful picture of their death to an old way of life and being "raised . . . up with Christ" (Eph. 2:6). Baptism also enables the believer to identify with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism is a symbol of what has taken place in the person through belief in Christ. Baptism does not save but is a picture of salvation. It is also a covenant with God and with fellow believers to live worthy of Christ. Similarly, Baptists believe that the Lord's Supper is not a sacrament or necessary for salvation but symbolizes the broken body and shed blood of Jesus for our salvation.

Baptism takes place within the community of believers, a church. Paul wrote to the Ephesians about people of diverse background, such as Jews and Gentiles, being brought together as one in Christ. Thus, a church is to be made up of people who have "been brought near through the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13). As such, a church is a divine-human organization. It is divine in the sense that it is the "body of Christ" and only those who have been saved in Christ are to be members. It is human in that it is made up of people who are saved but who are still imperfect.

Another way to state this conviction is that Baptists hold to the concept of a "believers' church," a regenerate church membership. Only people who have been saved by grace through faith and who have testified to that experience are to be members of a church. This means that each member of the local body of baptized believers has come into the fellowship in the same way. There is equality in salvation and church membership.

This leads to the Baptist emphasis on *theo-democratic* church governance. Baptist churches have no hierarchy. No individual or group of people decides for the entire body of members what they are to believe and to do. Rather each member of the body shares in the decisions. Yet, ideally, the decisions are not to be what the people want, but what Christ, the head of the church, wants. Thus the use of the term *theo-* (the Greek word for God) *democracy* (the word for rule by the people). Through Bible study, prayer, discussion, and meditation the members are to seek the will of God as they participate in congregational church governance.

Furthermore, each church is autonomous—that is, independent. Baptist churches are not subject to rule or governance by any outside body in regard to faith and religious practice. No “denominational headquarters” or government agency dictates to a church what to believe or

Beliefs Important to Baptists

The Baptist Distinctives Committee of the Baptist General Convention of Texas has developed a list of basic Baptist beliefs that are considered not “official” but representative of what many Baptists believe. In alphabetical order, not by priority, these are the beliefs:

- Authority of the Bible
- Autonomy of the local congregation of believers
- Believer’s baptism and church membership
- Congregational church government
- Deity and lordship of Jesus Christ
- Evangelism and missions: the Great Commission
- Religious freedom and separation of church and state
- Salvation only by grace through faith
- Security of the believer
- Soul competency and the priesthood of the believer
- Symbolic understanding of baptism and the Lord’s Supper
- Voluntary cooperation among churches.

how to worship. How could it be otherwise? The Bible indicates that each believer is competent in religion under God. Therefore each church made up of Baptists is equal before God and has no authority over another.

However, a local body of baptized believers on its own cannot adequately carry out the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18–20). Therefore, Baptist churches cooperate with one another for the sake of missions, evangelism, Christian education, ministry, and other causes. This cooperation is purely voluntary, as it was in New Testament times among churches. Voluntary cooperation among Baptist churches began with associations of churches, expanded to state conventions, and finally to national conventions and bodies of Baptists. Each church relates directly to any organization of Baptists beyond it, and that relationship is always voluntary. Baptist organizations beyond local congregations are also autonomous and relate voluntarily with one another. Through such voluntary cooperation, Baptists have been able to have an impact for good on millions of people throughout the world.

Priesthood of the Believers (Eph. 2:11-19)

Saved by grace through faith and competent in religion under God, each Baptist through Christ has “access to the Father by one Spirit” (Eph. 2:18). Paul declared to the Ephesians that each believer in Christ has access to God in the same way. There is not one way for the Gentile and another for the Jew. In Christ such distinctions disappear, and every believer has equal access to God.

The New Testament reveals that in Christ we become “priests.” Peter stated that those in Christ are a “holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5) and a “royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9). In the Old Testament the people had access to God through priests. In the New Testament every disciple of Jesus has access to God directly. Thus a major emphasis of Baptists is the “priesthood of believers.”

Being a priest carries both opportunity and responsibility. The opportunity is to relate directly with God through prayer, worship, meditation, trust, and obedience. No special clerical class is needed to represent us to God or to serve as a mediator between God and ourselves. However, with this opportunity goes responsibility. We are to take the knowledge of God that is ours and share it with everyone in witness and ministry. That is, we are to be priests to others, loving and caring for them in Jesus' name. Therefore, Baptists take seriously their individual responsibility for evangelism, mission, and ministry to all people.

The doctrine of the priesthood of believers coupled with the doctrine of soul competency calls for religious freedom and the separation of church and state. Under God, people ought to be free to exercise both their competency in matters of faith and religious practice as well as their opportunity and responsibility as believer priests. No ecclesiastical or governmental body ought to interfere with these practices or attempt to dictate to the followers of Christ what to believe or how to respond to what they perceive as the will of God.

When Baptists first proclaimed religious liberty, they met terrible resistance. Religious authorities viewed the concept as heretical. Governmental authorities viewed it as treasonous. They thought that allowing people religious freedom would weaken the power of the government and possibly cause people to demand political as well as religious freedom. Baptists were seen as a threat both to despotic monarchs and to dictatorial clergy. Therefore Baptists suffered persecution at the hands of both church and state. Ridicule, abuse, imprisonment, torture, and death did not silence the Baptists, however. They persisted in their struggle for religious freedom for all, not just for themselves.

Largely due to the efforts of Baptists and others of similar views, we enjoy religious freedom in the United States. The Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the United States guarantees that our nation will have no established—that is, government-supported—religion. In many places in the world, governments support a particular religion or Christian denomination in various ways, such as through taxation.

Baptists insist that the support of a church ought to be by the voluntary tithes and offerings of the members, not by government-coerced taxation.

We can be grateful that church and state are separate in our nation, with churches supported voluntarily by members and not through government coercion. People of all religious persuasions and those with none are to be free from government interference in matters of faith. Soul competency and the priesthood of believers are best practiced when there is a free church in a free state.

So Who in the World Are Baptists, Anyway?

Basic to all of these beliefs is the Baptist insistence that the Bible is the Word of God and our sole written authority for faith and practice. Baptists declare that we have no creed but the Bible. Baptists reject all creeds as spurious efforts to capture the truth of the Holy Bible in a human document. Indeed, Baptists have developed confessions of faith, but these are intended to serve only as broad guides to interpretation and never as an authoritative or official expression of biblical truth. Such confessions are merely that—confessions of what a particular group of Baptists believe. They have no authority over any individual or church.

Thus we return to a core Baptist conviction: freedom of the soul before God. This freedom includes freedom to interpret the Bible. With that freedom goes responsibility, of course, such as the responsibility to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting Scripture and to use sound principles of biblical interpretation.

So who in the world are Baptists, anyway? Certainly we have much in common with all followers of Jesus Christ, such as a belief in God, the Bible, Jesus, and the importance of church. However, we differ on certain matters and emphasize particular doctrines. These differences and emphases taken as a whole set Baptists apart as distinctive. We believe these beliefs that define us are based on the Bible. We also believe that

each person ought to be free to determine his or her own beliefs apart from coercion of church or state. Thus Baptists share enthusiastically our view of God, salvation, and other key doctrines while granting to others the freedom to share their views. In fact, Baptists have been willing to die for the freedom of all people to express through word and deed their religious convictions. That is a heritage worth preserving for the generations to follow.

QUESTIONS

1. Consider the list in the sidebar, “Beliefs Important to Baptists,” set forth by the Baptist Distinctives Committee of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Would you add any? Take away?
2. Why is the concept of soul competency basic to many of the other Baptist doctrines?
3. Which of the Baptist beliefs and doctrines would you describe as the most basic and why?

