

Baptist Identity

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Many times when people ask the question, “What is a Baptist?,” they’re looking for certain qualities that distinguish Baptists from other denominations. But to look for distinguishing characteristics of Baptists is a question of “Baptist distinctives.” The definition of a “Baptist” includes far more than our distinguishing doctrines and practices. What it means to be “Baptist” involves the whole of “Baptist identity.” So, the question before us is “What are the basic elements of Baptist identity?” “Baptist Identity” is an interconnected web of doctrine that leads to Baptist distinctives (in the Baptist’s opinion). The first three major headings below come from the introduction of Tom Nettles’s masterful work, *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and*

Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life.

1. Baptists are Orthodox. Baptists hold to the historic symbols of orthodoxy, including the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Athanasius, the Apostles Creed, etc. These classical creeds confess Trinitarian theism and biblical Christology. Baptists, along with all orthodox Christians, believe in the Trinity, that God is one in essence and three in person. We also believe in biblical Christology, that the incarnate Christ is two natures, a divine nature and a human nature, united in one person. We believe that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners through His death and resurrection. This means that it’s impossible for liberal theologians, who deny the deity of Christ but affirm the immersion of believers, to be considered Baptists. Orthodoxy has been an indispensably interconnected part of Baptist identity from the beginning.
2. Baptists are Evangelical. Orthodoxy inevitably leads to evangelicalism, when orthodoxy is believed from the heart. Evangelicals consciously adhere to and love the God of orthodoxy. The essence of evangelicalism is the gospel, that God in Christ redeems poor sinners by free grace because of Christ’s work. Evangelicals understand that they are justified by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone. And the truths of complete forgiveness of sins and graciously imputed righteousness inevitably lead to love for God, repentance of sin, and a total-life reorientation to God that inevitably issues in humility and love for others. These doctrines completely undercut all sacramentalist systems of theology, since redemptive grace comes through Christ alone, not through the sacraments, the church, or the priesthood. These glorious evangelical doctrines also lead to a deep missionary impulse, since those so graciously converted by God’s free grace long to share their hope with others.
3. Baptists are Separate. Baptists believe that orthodoxy and evangelicalism naturally lead to the separatist position. The separatist view is simply that only those who from the heart (evangelical) love the one true God (orthodoxy) are the people of God. This doctrine inevitably shapes ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) and distinguishes Baptists from evangelical Paedobaptists, including Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, and so on. Tom Nettles rightly says, “The true Separatist position, endorsed by believers baptism, affirms that the local and visible church exists only as a community of gathered believers and opposes the idea that the church exists as those born into the state or is associated with true believers as a part of their families without personal regeneration” (*By His Grace and For His Glory* xxi).
4. Implications of Baptist Separatism. The doctrine that the church should be composed of believers only has a number of important implications.

First, only evangelism can grow the church. The church cannot grow by natural generation or by military conquest. Souls must be converted by the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. People must voluntarily love Jesus Christ from the heart, if they are to be counted among those who belong to Him. This is why Baptists have always been a missionary people.

Second, congregational church government is implied. If the members of a church are converted, they possess the Spirit of Christ and therefore have the spiritual capacity to vote on matters of leadership, membership, and discipline. An unconverted membership will not choose wise leaders or make wise decisions about membership and discipline, but a converted membership has the capacity to do so.

Third, separation of church and state is required. If the church includes only those who from the heart embrace the God of orthodoxy, then the state has no power over the church to determine its confession or forms of worship. Furthermore, neither the church nor the state has any power to coerce belief, require church attendance, or force the consciences of human beings in any way. Therefore liberty of conscience and religious liberty are implied. Baptists believe that the biblical ideal is a free church in a free state.

Fourth, all of this rules out infant baptism. Baptism, the sign of the new covenant people of God, should only be applied to those who from the heart confess and love the God of orthodoxy. The children of church members should not be added to the church involuntarily. Including unbelievers in the church will necessarily populate the church with people who do not love God and do not love orthodox truth from the heart. The inevitable result of paedobaptism will be (and has been) the loss of orthodoxy and the loss of faithful witness to Christ.