



# “What Is A Reformed Baptist Church?”

## Study 5: What It Means To Be “Baptist” (2 Cor. 10:7-18)

Some see denominations as a bane (a cause of great distress or annoyance), others as a boon (a thing that is helpful or beneficial). It is unrealistic to wish for denominations to disappear. Just as there are diverse nations in the world, and diverse families in any community, there are diverse denominations among the Evangelicals. A better approach is to understand why denominations exist and to draw near to those that appear serious about wanting to follow the teaching of the Bible. Here, we attempt to introduce the Baptists, which historically consisted of two main branches — the Particular Baptists and the General Baptists. There are seven characteristics that mark out the Baptists from other denominations.

### I. Characteristics of the Baptists

**1. *The Supremacy of Scripture:*** The Baptists of the 17th century held seriously to the principle of “sola scriptura” recovered during the Reformation a century earlier. They looked upon themselves as continuing with the work of reforming the church, which they regarded as incomplete and had stagnated. The 66 books of the Bible were directly inspired by the God and “kept pure through subsequent ages by His singular care and providence” (1689:1:8), so that the teaching intended for us remain trustworthy despite copying errors. This view of Scripture has been described as “the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture” (VPI). We, therefore, maintain that Scripture is entirely factual, accurate and truthful. So high a regard have the Baptists for the supremacy of Scripture that John Quincy Adams, an American Baptist pastor of the 19th century, included “the establishment of the correct principle of biblical translation” as one of their distinctives. (We reject the books of the Apocrypha as Scripture, which the Roman Catholic Church adds to the Bible. We also reject the VPP (Verbal, Plenary, Preservation) view of the Bible advocated by some Fundamentalists, in which is claimed that original autographs have been preserved perfectly in the apographs, i.e. transmitted versions, underlying the King James Version of the Bible.)

**2. *The Gathered Church:*** Baptists regard the church of Jesus Christ as a purely spiritual organisation. They admit to baptism and membership only those who show a “credible profession of faith” (John 5:24). Such baptised believers are gathered into churches by voluntarily covenanting together, to worship and serve God in the way prescribed in the Bible. Membership with the church is distinguished from attendance in the congregation. In maintaining a regenerate church membership, Baptists are consistent with:

(i) the teaching of Christ in John 18:36, “My kingdom is not of this world”;

- (ii) the practice of the apostles in baptising only believers, as seen in the New Testament, and especially in the book of Acts;
- (iii) the New Testament description of church members as spiritual seed, living stones, saints, sincere believers, etc.;
- (iv) the teaching of the New Testament that we are born again by the Holy Spirit, through the word of truth (John 3:7-8; Rom. 10:17; 1 Pet. 1:23), not by parental descent and not by a ritual.

**3. *The Voluntary Nature of Discipleship:*** This principle involves religious liberty and the rights of conscience. Religious liberty is different from toleration. Toleration is the allowance of that which is not wholly approved. As applied to religion, the term is objectionable because it presupposes the existence of some mere human authority which has the power to grant or withhold from man the exercise of freedom in matters of religion. The free exercise of religious liberty and the rights of conscience is alone compatible with personal accountability, which is taught in the Bible, and it is alone compatible with the spirit of the gospel (Luke 9:49-50; Acts 5:29). Baptists have always strenuously contended for the acknowledgement of this principle and have laboured to propagate it. They might not agree with what is propagated by others, but they will defend their right in propagating it. In the same way, the Baptists expect others to respect their own right to propagate what they believe, without restriction or intimidation. Such freedom and rights are not without limits. Firstly, such freedom and rights must not encroach upon the freedom and rights of others. Secondly, such freedom and rights are proscribed by the Creator of the human race who has written His law in our hearts (Rom. 2:14-16). There are universal values of morality and decency, of dignity and integrity, which you breach at the risk of disdain and possible isolation from your fellow humans, and the judgement of God on the last day.

**4. *The Baptism of Believers by Immersion:*** Baptists have always contended for the baptism of believers by immersion. The subject must be a believer, while the mode is to be immersion. Infants are not suitable subjects of baptism because “there is neither command, example, nor clear inference in the Holy Scriptures for their baptism”. Immersion alone is the mode because:

- (i) the word “baptizo” in Greek actually means “to dip, to submerge, to immerse”, and not to sprinkle (“rantizo”).
  - (ii) all the instances of baptism in the Bible support immersion – not sprinkling – of the believers (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:9-10; Acts 8:38-39).
  - (iii) immersion alone correctly pictures our union with Christ in His burial and resurrection, and the washing away of sins (Rom. 6:3-4; Acts 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11, etc.).
- In the extreme situation of a sick person being unable to be immersed, or that of a person dying before baptism, his salvation is not affected (cf. Luke 23:43).

**5. *The Headship of Christ:*** The Baptists hold to the view that, as head of the church, Jesus Christ fulfils the offices of prophet, priest and king. The outworking of the kingship of Christ leads to the congregational or independent nature of its form, and the autonomy of its government. It also leads to a belief in the separation of church and state. Since Christ is the head of the church, and each congregation is to be autonomous, there is a strong emphasis on the non-interference of civil authorities in the life of the church. The state and the church are two distinct institutions created by God, with their own spheres of authority (Rom. 13:1-7; Matt. 22:21). Such equality and independence allow for the possibility of mutual benefit between them without one encroaching upon the other’s sphere of authority. Baptists have

suffered for resisting attempts by the state to control the church by legislation or taking upon itself the right to approve the appointment of officers in the church.

**6. *The Priesthood and Prophethood of All Believers:*** Jesus Christ, as head of the church, also exercises the offices of prophet and priest. He has taught, “One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren (Matt. 23:8).” A local church, of believers covenanted together, has been given all the authority and power necessary to teach and to admonish one another (Matt. 28:18-20; 1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Cor. 5:12-13; 6:5). This principle is often wrongly taken out of the context of the local church, and then applied to the individual Christian. It is used to bolster an independent spirit that smacks of the world rather than of the spirit of the Bible. The correct understanding of this principle is that every member of the church is to be involved in the work of God’s kingdom. The church is likened to the human body in which each member has a role and each is dependent on the others (1 Cor. 12). The church does not depend on the officers alone, or the pastor alone, to function well.

**7. *The Abiding Relevance of the Great Commission:*** Baptists hold strongly to the abiding relevance of the Great Commission. An eminent scholar, Joseph Angus said, “Two peculiarities distinguish the Baptist history of the seventeenth century. It was an age of public disputation; and ministers devoted a large amount of time to evangelistic work.” Preachers were sent out, not only to win souls to Christ, but to gather them into churches. What happened in Britain was repeated in America. In the first half of the 18th century, a number of Particular Baptist churches fell into Hyper-Calvinism which stifled evangelism and church-planting. They stayed aloof from the revival that was taking place through the preaching of George Whitefield and John Wesley. Towards the end of the century, William Carey was used by God to stir afresh the historic evangelistic fervour of the Particular Baptists, and to extend it to foreign missions. William Carey has been called “the father of modern missions”. The 19th century was an age of cooperation in missions between the New Connexion of General Baptists and the Particular Baptists. This was for the better, and for the worse, for both groups of Baptists. For the better, there was a recovery of the mission-mindedness of earlier years. For the worse, there was less attention paid to doctrinal integrity and the use of the Confessions of Faith. The Baptists in America were influenced by the controversial revivalist, Charles Finney (1792-1875), to adopt his free-willism (or easy-believism) and the altar call – which became characteristics of modern evangelism. The Baptist churches planted overseas by missionaries from Britain and America did not make too sharp a distinction between the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists. It was until the 1960s that a recovery of Reformed theology triggered off the desire in some individuals to plant distinctively Reformed Baptist churches, and inspired others to recover their Calvinistic roots with an appreciation of the 1689 Confession of Faith.

## **II. What it means to be Baptist**

When someone claims himself to be Baptist, he could mean one of three things.

(i) He belongs to a Baptist church without knowing what it means to be Baptist. He is, in fact, a *nominal Baptist*. This is not a satisfactory position, just as it is not satisfactory to be a nominal Christian, i.e. a Christian in name only, who is in reality not a Christian. A nominal Baptist might be a true Christian, but he is not a true Baptist. Along the way, he might be swayed to join the paedobaptists or another grouping.

(ii) He believes in believer’s baptism and the autonomy of the local church. In reality, he is *baptistic* in his understanding on baptism and the church but mistakenly considers himself a Baptist. Other churches hold to believer’s baptism and the autonomy of the local church but

have distinctives of their own and prefer to identify themselves with some founder or movement other than the Baptists., e.g. the Plymouth Brethren, the Evangelical Free Churches.

(iii) He is *consciously Baptist*, identifying himself with a Baptist church and adhering to the distinctives of the Baptists. This position is the most satisfactory. There is no necessity for a church to have historical succession to a Baptist church of the seventeenth century to be regarded as Baptist. There is no necessity for an individual believer to have family history in a Baptist church to be considered Baptist. Instead, it is more important to embrace the doctrine and practice of the Baptists.

It is idealistic and impractical to reject denominations as unbiblical. The churches in the New Testament were identified along regional lines (Acts 9:31; Gal. 1:2; Rev. 1:11) and by who founded them (Acts 15:1-2; 1 Cor. 4:15-17; 2 Cor. 10:13-16; Gal. 2:7-10). We do not want to “reinvent the wheel”.

### Questions

1. Is it possible to discern the differences between a Reformed church and another Evangelical church from: (i) the worship service; and (ii) the members? What differences would there be? Are these a matter: (a) of concern; and (b) to be proud of?
2. Christians from other Evangelical churches may say to you that the distinctives of Reformed churches are also found in theirs, only the emphasis placed upon them may differ. What is your response to this?
3. “Reformed Christians are too dogmatic and rigid to my liking.” Comment.

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