

WHY BE A BAPTIST?

FIRST THINGS FIRST

The number one question is not ‘Why be a Baptist?’ It’s ‘Are you a Christian?’ All Baptists would say it is more important that you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour and that you have a living relationship with God than that you belong to any particular group of Christians. If you are not yet a Christian, then keep reading, but when you have finished go and talk to someone who is a Christian about what is on your mind. Nobody can be a Christian for you. That is something you have to decide and live for yourself.

JESUS FIRST

Baptists believe that there is no one so important in human history as Jesus. Why? Because he is God with us: he is God’s way of showing us what God is like (John 1:14).

We can see in Jesus that God is on our side. The greatest way you show a person your love is by giving up your life for them. That’s what Jesus has done. Not just for good people, or clever people, or rich people, or Baptist people, but everyone. He died on the cross, showing God’s love to all, even to those who killed him.

The cross is not the end for Jesus. After Good Friday comes Easter Day. God raised Jesus from the dead. We might have killed him but God said ‘Yes’ to Jesus’ life and consequently Christians call him ‘Lord’.

Christians believe in God the creator of all that is. We believe that Jesus is the Son of God. And we believe that God is always at work, even today, in the Holy Spirit.

JESUS IS LORD

When anyone is a Christian the central thing they say is ‘Jesus is Lord’ (Phil 2:11). Being a Christian means following Jesus, trusting him and obeying him.

Baptists have always wanted to put Jesus first. We think being a Christian is not just believing a lot of things about Jesus (like a creed) but loving and serving Jesus in friendship and loyalty. Jesus is the truth about God. He is our hope and our saviour.

TOGETHER WITH JESUS

In the story of Jesus, we read that he called people to follow him. These are called ‘disciples’, which means learners and followers. The first friends of Jesus were those who received the Holy Spirit after the resurrection of Jesus. They became the church.

Baptists have always thought the church very important. It is all those people who believe in Jesus and have given their lives to him.

The church is not a building, or priest, or people who happen to live in a ‘Christian’ country. The church is a company of believers. The followers of Jesus. They are people whom God has called to live the life of his kingdom, those who say ‘JESUS IS LORD’.

Jesus said that wherever any of his disciples meet together in his name there he is (Matt 18:20). That’s what Baptists believe. We think that wherever a group of Christians meet and promise together to live and work as Christian people there is the church. You don’t have to have a building, or a priest, just people with Jesus.

No one can do a private deal with Jesus. We need one another in order to live the Christian life. The church is not an ‘optional extra’ to being a Christian. Being a disciple is not a ‘lone ranger’ calling.

TOGETHER WITH ONE ANOTHER

So, Baptists believe in being in membership with a local church. Local Baptist churches appear to be independent of one another but, in fact, they have always linked together into what we call 'Associations'. They join with other Baptist churches in an area for support and mission and this is fundamental in our understanding of the church. Together we make up 'The Baptist Union'. But we are not THE Baptist Church but a union of local churches and Associations. Belonging together in Christ, locally is what makes our membership in the world-wide church real.

BELIEVERS' BAPTISM

Most people think it is our emphasis on believers' baptism that is the most obvious mark of the Baptists. But you will have realised that it is the understanding of the church as a company that freely follows Jesus Christ which is the foundation. And this explains our approach to baptism.

The argument goes like this. If the church is made up only of freely believing disciples of Jesus Christ the Lord, and if baptism is the sign of our joining ourselves to Christ and his Church, then baptism must be for believers only.

We baptise people by immersion. That means that, after a person has publicly said that they have turned to God and accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, then they are 'buried' for a moment in water, in a baptistry, which is a large tank in the church. The whole act looks like someone dying and being buried, then being raised to life again. Look at Rom 6:1-4.

People are not 'saved' by being baptised. Their baptism is a response to God who has made himself known to them and given the gift of faith. On that profession of faith people are baptised, become united to Christ and members of his church.

This does not mean that Baptists have no interest in children. We believe that they are all held within the love of God. We welcome little children as did Jesus (Mark 10:13-16) and teach them the Christian faith. But whether they become Christians or not is between them and God. We cannot decide for them. We will not make them part of the church without their consent. Faith in Christ Jesus is a matter of personal response, and the symbol of that is believers' baptism. And notice, it is not the baptism of adults but of believers.

WHERE DO BAPTISTS GET ALL THIS?

What is the authority for believing and acting as Baptists do? The answer is, in major part, the Bible. The scriptures of Old and New Testaments contain the record of God's ways with us and to that we constantly turn. The Bible is our guide in matters of belief and behaviour.

This is not to say that we make an idol out of the Bible, or that we slavishly take it literally. We have looked to the Holy Spirit, God himself, to deepen our understanding and bring the truth to light. Baptists are a Bible-loving people because we believe that God still speaks to his people through these ancient texts.

WHO DECIDES?

But how do Baptists decide what, is the will of God? And if they are local churches, who tells them how they are to worship, whether they are to run a youth club, put up a new building, or have someone as their minister?

That's really like asking, who is the head of the church? The only answer Baptists can give to that is 'Jesus Christ'! All that a Baptist church ever wants to do is the will of God.

It is part of Baptist conviction that each local church is free to seek and respond to the will of God as they understand it. No Bishops or Councils are there to tell others what they must do. And neither should the State try to tell Christians how they ought to worship and whom they can have as ministers.

No, under God, the church members meet together and seek the mind of Christ. Church members meetings are the occasions when the will of God is sought in prayer and mutual listening. If a vote is ever taken it can look like a democratic form of government but properly the picture is one of God's people together not trying to win their arguments but to share and do the mind of Christ.

MINISTERS?

Baptists believe God calls some people, women and men, to leadership in the church. God gives these people in order that the whole church is built up in its faith and work (Eph 4:11-12).

But more fundamentally, Baptists believe that by their baptism every Christian is commissioned to share the work of God. We are all 'gifted' by God in particular ways for the tasks to which God calls the Church (1 Cor 12:4-11). The important thing is that the local church fulfils its shared ministry together. To that end God gives ministers but they, with all other members of the church, are under the Lordship of Christ. We believe this is a biblical way to look at ministry.

So, we do not have a separated priesthood but believe instead in the 'priesthood of all believers'. We minister to one another as God gives us gifts. No one stands between us and Jesus Christ (Heb 4:14-16). And because none of us knows it all, we mutually submit to each other in Christ as we seek to do his will.

MISSIONARIES?

When anyone joins a Baptist church, they automatically become a part of a missionary movement. Baptists think of the church not as an end in itself but as part of God's mission to the world. To be baptised into Christ is to be baptised into that mission.

The mission involves spreading the good news of the love of God, the forgiveness of our failures, and the overcoming of death in Jesus Christ. But it also leads into all those actions which follow from the picture of God's kingdom we receive in the Bible. So, mission involves healing the sick, housing the homeless, feeding the hungry, peace making and much else. Social action and evangelism are one in God's mission.

Baptists have tried to support this work not just in their localities but throughout the whole world. The Baptist Missionary Society was the first of the modern missionary Initiatives among the churches. Baptists want to tell the world of Jesus so that all may find life in him (John 10:10).

FREEDOM

But Baptists do not want to try to force anyone to believe. We believe in religious freedom for all, to believe or not to believe. One of the first calls for religious liberty was made by a Baptist. We think like this because we are sure that each one of us is responsible before God and that no other person should try to take that freedom away. Since our earliest beginnings Baptists have been concerned with wider issues of freedom. Baptists of the day played a significant part in the movement to abolish slavery. Since then there have been many steps taken to free people from want, discrimination, ignorance and oppression.

OPEN TO THE FUTURE

There is nothing fixed or final about Baptist life. As a people we remain open to the new things God will show us by his Spirit. We see ourselves more as a movement than a fixed institution. So, most Baptists are glad to be part with other Christians in the search for a great Christian unity among the churches. As one of our hymns has it, 'The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word'.

WHY BE A BAPTIST?

We do not claim to be the only Christians. You certainly do not have to be a Baptist to get to heaven! But we do believe there are important gospel truths for which we stand.

They are:

- The Lordship of Jesus Christ
- The Church as the gathered company of believers
- Churches associating together
- Believers' baptism
- The authority of the Bible
- The significance of the church meeting
- The priesthood of all believers
- The missionary task
- Religious freedom

All of this is really a way of being the Church of Jesus, of being Christian. And that's the important thing!

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