

PHILIPPIANS 4:8, 9
MORE THAN A DENOMINATION:
CHALLENGES FACING BAPTISTS IN A NEW ERA

“Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practise these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”¹

The name “Baptist,” is an opprobrium in some Christian and non-Christian circles. Why would anyone deliberately adopt the name “Baptist?” What you may not know is that Baptists did not choose the name they bear—it was conferred by people who stood opposed to the principles the early Baptists espoused; the name was given by people opposed to what we believe and hold dear as Baptists. Few people who identify as Baptists today are aware of the history of the name. More tragic still is the fact that few people claiming to be Baptist know what Baptists believe. For too many, “Baptist” is simply a name; however, it should define a Faith.

What makes a Baptist a Baptist? The question is central to the search for Baptist identity. There is no individual Baptist without a Baptist congregation. Staunch advocates of believers’ church, Baptists must answer this question of identity together, as well as individually. Eventually, the answer to this question will shape our churches, our affiliations, and every aspect of our work together.²

It is sadly obvious that the truths that define us as Baptists are neglected today. Even denominational leaders and seminary instructors have permitted a dilution of Baptist theology during recent years. This is a trend which concerns me deeply, and which should concern each of us both as Christians and as seekers of truth.

The current generation of Baptists knows little about Baptist doctrine. Consequently, contemporary Baptists invest considerable energies searching for some solid ground on which they can base their lives and Christian discipleship. Sadly, this statement is made regarding denominational leaders and teachers in our theological institutions. If those supposed to provide leadership prove to be ignorant of the doctrines Baptist have championed, should we marvel that those occupying the pews of our churches know so little concerning this rich heritage?

The tragedy of this censure is that our Baptist people are joining with non-Baptist evangelicals in a virtual new evangelical ecumenism leading to a number of novel ministry ventures that are not always beneficial to spiritual health of the congregation. Areas of commonality and agreement have been identified with many of these evangelical Christians; and while this trend has decidedly positive elements, the trend exposes neglect of the traits that have forged our unique theological identity and shaped our mission and our passion in pursuing many of these ventures.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version** © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² See R. Albert Mohler, Jr., in R. Stanton Norman, **More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity** (Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN 2001) viii

The result of this dilution of Baptist doctrine is that we Baptists have lost the power of our convictions and too often lost even our identity as a historic people. If we are truly identical to all the other communions, then let us cease clinging to our identity and join with whoever best fulfils the mission we were assigned. However, if we hold distinctive truths that mark us as a people, and if those distinctive truths make us the people we admire historically, then let us return to those truths and proudly proclaim them. Our endeavour is not to proselytise non-Baptists in order to make them Baptists; rather, it is to clearly articulate truths that may otherwise be neglected to the detriment of the world in which we live. Our purpose is to remain true to the Word of the Living God.

With the Word of God as our authority, Baptists must relearn the basics and reclaim the richness of our doctrinal heritage. We must rediscover a lost and neglected wisdom, and reconstruct the foundation and framework of our faith. It is time that we were again about this task. Though we rejoice in the stand of every believer who honours God—whatever label they bear, we must not turn aside from declaring the truths that have defined us as a people. If we are to define what it means to be Baptist, it will be necessary that we establish the basis for every belief, the basis for every statement. In order to do this we must agree upon a standard. The standard for faith and practise is the Word of God; and in particular, our authority is the New Testament. That truth needs to be explored thoroughly as we prepare ourselves for the future.

Baptists share many doctrines and practises in common with other religious bodies. In common with Jews, we believe in one God, Creator of all things. Many of the teachings of the Catholic Church are acceptable to Baptists. With them, we believe in one God in three Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We also believe in concert with those of the Roman Catholic persuasion in the incarnation, the atoning death and the glorious resurrection of Christ the Lord. As is true of Catholics, we have high regard for the Scriptures as the written Word of God. We do not hesitate to say that we share similar moral views with both Jews and Catholics and even with Mormons. Nevertheless, we hold most truths in common with other evangelical denominations.

The whole body of evangelical truth belongs to all evangelical denominations. We rejoice in the fact that the things in which we agree are more numerous and more important than the things in which we differ. We join with other evangelical denominations in holding to precious truths such as the inspiration of Scripture, the existence of one God in three Persons, the necessity of the new birth through repentance and faith and salvation by grace and not by works. We hold in common with other evangelical groups the deity, substitutionary death, resurrection, ascension and Second Coming of Christ Jesus our Lord. As is true for all evangelical Christians, we hold a final judgement, with eternal blessedness for the redeemed and eternal death for the wicked.³

Throughout the whole of Christendom, there are differences in church polity, in our views of church sacraments and ordinances, the appointment of church officers and the conception of the church. This does not begin to address the differences in the doctrines of salvation, the authority of creeds and the worth of the individual before God. It is in these areas that Baptists have distinguished themselves and served to bring a great host of evangelical Christians into amazing agreement during the past three centuries.

³ See, e.g., J. Clyde Turner, **Our Baptist Heritage** (Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, TN 1945) 9, 10

Certain truths must be stated at this point. First, **BAPTISTS ARE NOT PROTESTANTS**. Protestant denominations are those that protested against the sinful abuses of the Roman Catholic Church and finally severed their relationship with that institution. The Reformers sought to establish new religions; unfortunately, not one of the Reformers carried through on their intent, for each brought out of their mother church doctrines and practises antithetical to New Testament teaching. Such corrupt practises include the union of church and state, infant baptism, pouring or sprinkling as the mode of baptism, and a hierarchical form of church governance. Baptists did not come out of the Catholic Church; hence, in the strictest sense, Baptists are not to be classed as Protestants. Baptists are evangelical, but we are not Protestant.

A second important truth is that **THERE IS NO MODERN FOUNDER OF BAPTISTS**. Martin Luther is the founder of the several denominations bearing his name; and well may the various Lutheran sects be proud of Luther's bold stand. We Baptists honour Martin Luther as a great Reformer and as a stalwart of the Christian Faith. Methodism began with the ministries of John Wesley, though Wesley Himself never forsook the Anglican Communion. Presbyterians proudly look to John Calvin as their founder. The Anglican Church was born as result of the religious controversy arising from the matrimonial escapades of Henry VIII, as an offspring of the Roman Catholic Church. The Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ all trace their beginning to the teachings of Alexander Campbell in the early part of the nineteenth century. Campbell was excluded by conscientious Baptists who saw that he was beginning to teach doctrines that violated biblical tenets, and so he started a new denomination. The Foursquare Church was the result of the ministry of Aimee Semple McPherson and the Vineyard Movement can point to John Wimber as the founder. Nevertheless, there is no founder of Baptists.

A final truth that will prove helpful as we consider the challenges facing Baptists in the new century is that **BAPTISTS RECOGNISE NO FOUNDER BUT CHRIST**. Although the name Baptists was not used to designate a particular group until a few centuries ago, and though it may not be possible to trace Baptist history back to the apostles without a break, it is true that Baptists are a Bible-made people, and Baptist principles and practises have prevailed among those seeking to honour God through the centuries.⁴

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES — When I came to faith in Christ the Lord, I did what some may believe to be a strange thing. After the fact, my actions seem quite reasonable, but at the time, some dear friends thought me to be quite radical. I wrote on a sheet of paper a list of major doctrines. To the right of each doctrine, I provided two additional columns. One column bore the title "Proved," and the other column was entitled "Disproved."

I then purchased a wide-margin Bible and began to read through the Bible. A doctrine is naught but biblical truth expressed in some convenient and concise language. What better way to learn doctrine than through reading the Bible? As I encountered a truth concerning a given doctrine, I would note it by underlining the relevant verses, noting the doctrine(s) involved and citing other references in the margin of my Bible. By the time I had read the Bible through, I had gain a somewhat thorough grasp of biblical truth. Later, I learned that I had developed a biblical theology, in contradistinction to a systematic theology. Thus, I became a Baptist by conviction.

⁴ Turner, op. cit. 19

What is a Baptist? A Baptist is distinguished by a set of doctrinal truths, and not through denominational affiliation. As previously noted, we share many doctrines in common with other Christians. Certainly, we share in common with all Christians, faith in the Triune God. We believe, together with all Christians, that Jesus is very God and also fully man. Likewise, we share with all true believers the conviction that Jesus died a sacrificial death, that He was buried and that He rose from the tomb on the third day. Together with all Christians, we believe that the Risen Son of God ascended into heaven, from whence He shall return to judge the living and the dead. We believe that faith in Him is both mandatory and sufficient for salvation.

Whilst these truths are held in common with all Christians, it is nevertheless true that certain convictions distinguish us from other believers. Together with most evangelical believers, Baptists hold that **Bible to be authoritative for faith and practise**. However, Baptists are insistent that ***it is the Bible alone that is the basis for our faith***. This position has been historically identified as a Baptist position. Though we are aware of traditions, we do not elevate our traditions to the same level of authority as we do the Word of God. Baptists are insistent that we must find biblical warrant for every practise and for each doctrine. Those areas in which the Bible is silent are to be viewed as areas of freedom for us as a people of God. Therefore, the first great Baptist distinctive is that **the Scriptures alone are authoritative for faith and practise**.

We are insistent upon **the Lordship of Christ**. Consequently, it is our insistence upon His mastery which impels us to reject all baptismal modes except for that which He has given in the Word—immersion. We dare not alter that mode, knowing that Christ Himself gave us the mode and knowing that the Word is quite explicit in declaring the purpose for that mode. We submit to His reign and His revealed will in this matter.

It is commonly suggested that the distinctive emphasis among Baptists lies in the act of baptism; however, this is a misconception. Baptism is not, in fact, primary; it is always derivative and depends for its meaning on the conception of the Church that lies behind it. It is this idea that gives justification to Dr. Whitley's remark that "the distinctive feature about Baptists is their doctrine of the Church."⁵

The doctrine of the Church is in its turn largely conditioned by our conception of the origin, nature and purpose of the Church, and for that, Baptists argue, we must always go back to the New Testament. It is in the New Testament that we have the revelation of the mind and will of Christ, the Church's Founder and Living Head.

We believe in a **regenerate church membership** and **congregational church polity**. Those who unite with a Baptist Church must give a credible confession of faith in the Risen Son of God and submit to His reign over their life through embracing His command to be baptised as a picture of their faith. The Baptist congregation should reflect the church that shall meet in the presence of the Son of God after the Rapture. Those who seek only a social union should not find shelter within a Baptist congregation.

Moreover, a Baptist Church is a church without hierarchy. There is neither clergy nor laity in a Baptist Church. Each member is set in place by the will of God, gifted by the Holy Spirit and received by the congregation. Thus, each member is treated with dignity befitting those redeemed by the Son of God. The voice of each member is heard with respect as the business of the church is conducted. As a congregation, Baptists submit to the rule of God's Spirit, accepting one another in love as gifts from God's hand.

⁵ Henry Cook, **What Baptists Stand for** (Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, London, 1947) 17

We are tenacious in our insistence upon religious liberty and soul competency. **Religious freedom** asserts that the human, temporal realm has no authority to coerce religious commitments. God alone is sovereign over human conscience. Religious freedom guarantees the right of each individual to believe, and also to act on his or her beliefs as he or she chooses without fear of retribution from civil authorities. This sort of freedom also ensures that all religious congregations have the opportunity to structure their own faith and practise in accordance with their understanding of divine truth.⁶

Soul competency is the right and ability of each individual to approach God directly without a human intermediary. Soul competency assumes that man is made in God's image—that God has revealed Himself to each person and that God can communicate directly to each person. This encounter occurs within the context of Christian religious experience.⁷ We are convinced that each individual has an inalienable right of access to God and that this access will result either in acceptance of or rejection of God. Thus, each individual is responsible to God for his or her relationship to Him.

The last distinctive Baptist doctrine, growing out of our confidence in the Word, is **believer's baptism**. We baptise in obedience to the Master's command, baptising those who confess faith in Him because they *are* alive in Him and not in order to make them alive. We reject all efforts to make one a Christian which depends upon baptism since **baptism is a testimony and not a cause**. Therefore, baptism reflects our understanding of the salvation Christ provides and the place of His churches in His Kingdom.

As you review that list of distinctive Baptist doctrines, you might notice that there is considerable overlap with many evangelical denominations on some of the doctrines. That is true; however, only one who is Baptist by conviction could embrace all of them. Moreover, historically, it was Baptists who brought each of these distinctive truths to bear in evangelicalism, thus permanently changing the face of evangelicalism throughout the world. The danger today is that evangelicalism is changing Baptists.

FORSAKING OUR IDENTITY — The first great challenge facing Baptists in this day late in the Church Age is that we will forsake our identity. In a bid to be accepted by the broader church community, we may abandon our historic doctrinal position in an effort to curry favour with other Christians. The role that Baptists have played throughout history is jettisoned—neglected and forgotten—only at the peril of all evangelical believers.

Baptists should know what makes them Baptists. We should know the doctrines that distinguish us from other denominations even while recognising the particular teachings that mark those other communions. We do not seek to stand aloof from fellow Christians, but unless we know what we believe, we are in danger of surrendering precious truth in a mistaken bid to accommodate other faiths. As was true for Isaac, we need to dig again the wells of our fathers [see **GENESIS 26:18**]; we also dare not forget the mighty deeds of our forebears. The exploits of those who preceded us, standing firm in the face of opposition, must be recounted, just as the heroic acts of David's mighty men is described at the conclusion of his life [see **2 SAMUEL 23:8-39**]. The names of Greber, Hubmaier, Bunyan and Spurgeon should be as well known to every Baptist as are the names of Criswell, Falwell, Stanley or Graham.

⁶ R. Stanton Norman, **More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity** (Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN 2001) 36

⁷ Norman, *op. cit.*, 35

The history of the churches in the New World will record that during the first three centuries of national history, Baptists influenced evangelicalism greatly. The emphasis upon believer's baptism practised by many evangelicals today was the result of Baptist insistence upon this biblical teaching. The concept of a believers' church, or a regenerate church membership, is largely a Baptist concept that has been gradually adopted by most evangelical congregations. The insistence upon a free church within a free society as the religious ideal is undoubtedly a Baptist ideal that has found fertile ground among other communions, even those that historically rejected this particular teaching. The priesthood of the believer and the emphasis upon congregational church polity have influenced not only the churches of North America, but the American republic itself to a greater degree than we might ever imagine.

Baptists placed their stamp indelibly upon the face of North American church life during the first two centuries of the American republic. During the past three decades, however, evangelicalism has placed its stamp on the face of Baptist life. Among the doctrinal truths that Baptists have championed that have been embraced by evangelicals are the emphases upon biblical authority for faith and practise, congregational polity, religious liberty and soul competency. This does not even address missionary expansion as a consequence of the churches living out the Faith of Christ the Lord on a daily basis.

Should we Baptists forsake our identity, who will remind the churches of the need for scriptural authority in the coming millennium? Should Baptists cease to stand firmly on the principle of the lordship of Christ, who, pray tell, will resist the trend to exalt human experience? Within evangelicalism, I observe a disturbing tendency to exalt religious experience over biblical authority. Churches are becoming eclectic in doctrine and pragmatic in their approach to worship. This post-modern attitude affects every aspect of contemporary church life, and Baptists are not immune to this enervating movement. The churches that moved from the idea of a union of state and church will return quickly to that degraded position if we cease to practise this Faith. In the absence of sound Baptist churches, there is scant hope for doctrinal integrity in future generations as churches continue to emphasise experience over authority.

FORGETTING THE COST OF OUR FAITH — Christian forebears paid a frightful price for the Faith we now take for granted. Writing to saints who were obviously weary, the author of the Hebrews Letter reminded those wearied Christians of the cost already paid. In doing this, he educated all Christians concerning the cost of the Faith we now embrace. Though none of us listening today can claim to have experienced what this writer describes, we know that we are never far from the threat of persecution.

“Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For,

“Yet a little while,
and the coming one will come and will not delay;

but my righteous one shall live by faith,
and if he shrinks back,
my soul has no pleasure in him.’

“But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls” [HEBREWS 10:32-39].

Then, that author recounted heroic episodes of the Faith in a bid to encourage the saints. Listing those stalwarts and patriarchs one-by-one, he comes to a point where he seems awe-struck at the thought of the price they paid to be called by God's' Name. Listen as he recounts the deeds of heroes of the Faith, both known and unknown. “What more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

“And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” [HEBREWS 11:32-40].

Our spiritual forebears paid a dreadful price to ensure that we receive the Faith we profess. This unknown author makes one especially humbling statement when he writes, “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” [HEBREWS 12:4]. Baptists stand out as stars in the darkness in their refusal to surrender doctrinal integrity for momentary relief from persecution. Baptist principles ensured the persecution and slaughter of tens of thousands of our spiritual ancestors by European state churches—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran and Presbyterian alike. Because they refused to baptise their infants and insisted upon a regenerate church membership, Baptist were dispossessed, imprisoned, drowned, burned at the stake and killed in multiple inventive ways. To this day, state churches often coerce Baptists into paying support for priests and compel worship in unappealing conditions. We are too often ignorant of the high price paid for Baptist convictions.

“Cardinal Hosius, President of the Council of Trent (A. D. 1545), a distinguished dignitary of the Church of Rome, says: ‘If you behold their cheerfulness in suffering persecution, the Anabaptists run before all the heretics. If you have regard to the number, it is likely that in multitude they would swarm above all others, if they were not grievously plagued, and cut off with the knife of persecution. If you have an eye to the outward appearance of godliness, both the Lutherans and the Zwinglians must grant that they far pass them. If you will be moved by the boasting of the word of God, these be no less bold than Calvin to preach, and their doctrine must stand invincible above all power, because it is not their word, but the word of the living God.’”⁸

⁸ J. W. Porter, *The World's Debt to the Baptists* (Roger Williams Heritage Archives, 1914; 2003) 154-5; quoted from *Hosius Letters, Apud Opera*, 112-3

The source has been quoted many times, but that does not invalidate the information provided. It appears that the aforementioned quotation was first cited by Drs. Ypeig and Dermout in the “History of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands.” Dr. Ypeig was Professor of Theology at Gronigen and Dr. Dermout was Chaplain to the King of the Netherlands. Their investigation came as result of a claim by Dutch Baptists to apostolic origin, and the investigation verified that claim.⁹

Hounded from England, Baptists sought refuge in the New World where they were taxed to support the state churches. When they refused to pay for the support of Anglican priests in Virginia, their lands were seized and they were turned out in the dead of winter, their skirts cut short to their buttocks to ensure their suffering. Baptist lands were sold for a farthing to the Anglican priests as punishment for daring hold Baptist convictions. Baptist preachers were beaten until the blood ran into their boots in the Puritan Massachusetts colony. They were despised and hated throughout most of the colonies because they would not agree to be party to the organisation of a state church. Yet, Baptist persisted, holding convictions that could not be jettisoned for convenience.

The history of the twentieth century is a story of continued murder of untold numbers of Baptists because their conscience demands religious liberty and because they cannot submit to the concept of state control over the church. I know that other communions have their martyrs, but undoubtedly among the most persecuted people holding to doctrinal integrity have been the Baptists. Because they have resisted governmental intrusion in Europe, in Asia, in Africa, and even in our own nation of Canada, Baptist believers have suffered greatly. We must not forget the suffering of these our brothers and sisters in the Faith.

NEGLECTING THE COMMISSION OF OUR LORD — There is a final, great challenge facing Baptists in the twenty-first century. If we cease to hold to our convictions, how shall we fulfil the commission given by our Lord? I am concerned when I read that a higher percentage of Pentecostal, non-denominational worshippers and members of the Assemblies of God profess to be “born again” than do Baptists.¹⁰ This is explained by another finding which demonstrates that only three types of churches—Pentecostal, Assembly of God and non-denominational churches—had a majority of adherents who had shared their faith in Christ with a non-Christian in the year prior to the survey.¹¹ I suggest that Baptists have already ceased evangelising because too many have already forsaken the doctrines that once distinguished them as a people of God.

If the message does nothing else other than shake us from our lethargy, it will have honoured God. If you have gone through this year past and failed to speak to even one person concerning your Faith, you are a part of the problem. If you have failed to point even one non-Christian to faith in Christ the Lord, you give evidence that you have forsaken the Faith—tacitly, if not in actuality. It is time that as a congregation and as a people that hold Baptist—biblical—convictions we once again embrace the truths that mark us as a distinctive people and again act as a people committed to serving God with a radical abandon based upon knowledge of His holy will.

⁹ See I. K. Cross, **The Battle for Baptist History** (Brentwood Baptist Press, Columbus, GA 1990) 30

¹⁰ **Denominations**, <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryID=16>

¹¹ **The Year’s Most Intriguing Findings, From Barna Research Studies**, December 17, 2001, <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=103&Reference=F>

I conclude the message by charging my fellow believers to be accountable for what is done with the message. I insist that each Christian must individually accept responsibility to encourage each fellow member to rediscover these truths that have historically marked Baptist as a people of God. We must then insist that these truths be taught from the pulpit of our churches and that they be practised at every level of congregational life. Finally, we must each assume responsibility to win some someone to faith, even in this year. May God enable each of us to honour Him, stirring us deeply to obey His Word.

Is it possible that some share this service that have yet to know the grace of God? For any such individual, the message must conclude with a call to faith in the Living Son of God. He died for your sin and was raised for your justification.

The Word of God declares, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That passage concludes with a delightful promise as God declares that “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13** free translation].

Believe on the Lord Jesus and be saved. Amen.