

Why Be Baptist?

By Dr. Rick McClatchy and Dr. Bruce Prescott

Understanding our Baptist Heritage

Does it really matter if you are a Baptist? After all, God's children include people from all denominations. All groups are trying to help people love God and each other. Why is it important to claim a Baptist heritage?

Baptists certainly do not have all the answers. We have much to learn from the broader Christian community. Likewise, Baptists are fellow laborers with other denominations and ought to work with other denominations. Only after affirming our connectedness with the larger Christian family can we legitimately claim our Baptist heritage.

The Protestant Reformation



Martin Luther

Baptists are one branch of the Protestant Reformation that Martin Luther started in 1517. Protestants disagreed with the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of salvation. The Reformers declared that we are saved by grace through faith, not by the sacraments of the church.

The Catholic Church said Luther's teaching was heresy. Luther quoted the Bible to support his teachings. Catholic Church leaders claimed to be the official interpreters of scripture. They told Luther his interpretation was mistaken and held him accountable to teach and preach according to the official Catholic tradition of biblical interpretation. Luther responded:

"Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason — I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other — my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."

Luther claimed to be directly accountable to God for how he interpreted scripture. Then he translated the Bible from Latin into German so others could read the scriptures and decide for themselves what the Bible said.

When the scriptures were taken from the exclusive domain of church leaders and given to all Christians to read and interpret, the biblical doctrine that all believers are priests was reclaimed.

Luther and most of the other reformers emphasized the priesthood of believers to buttress support for the teaching of salvation by grace. A small group of reformers insisted that the doctrine also had profound implications for the life of the church.

This small group of reformers maintained that every believer had the right and responsibility to directly relate to God and to act as a priest of God. These reformers were labeled "radicals" because they wanted to pattern church life in accord with the New Testament where every member was commissioned and gifted for service.

Radical Reformers: A Community of Priests



Balthasar Hubmaier

The Anabaptists envisioned the church as a community of priests. They changed church life radically.

First, they insisted that church members must be believers — not infants — because becoming a priest required a conscious decision to live for Christ. They only baptized believers. Their churches were called believers' churches because every member had been baptized after making a personal affirmation of their belief that Jesus is Lord. This is not to imply that they did not pray for their children or provide them an environment that pointed toward Christ. They insisted, however, that the decision to make a faith commitment must be personal.

Also, they de-emphasized distinctions between clergy and laity, instead focusing upon the spiritual gifts of each person. They held that

all members of the church were equal ministers (priests) with various spiritual gifts. Consequently, everyone in the church would have a role to play in ministry, and everyone would have an equal voice in helping to discern God's will for the congregation. These radical churches became known for equality among members and for congregational decision-making.

A key issue for these independent, autonomous congregations concerned how would they relate to other congregations? Other denominations set up a church hierarchy to control and coordinate the work of the churches. The radical reformers rejected such a structure. Instead they proposed a voluntary association with other autonomous churches to work on projects of mutual concern. They called for cooperation between churches not control over churches.

Unlike many churches of their day, the radical reformers called for complete religious liberty for everyone — believer and non-believer. No one should be forced by the state to believe a certain way, nor should the church use the power of the state to advance its agenda. The church should advance the kingdom of God's work in society through the persuasiveness of its ideas and actions, not coercion.

The Emergence of Baptists



Roger Williams

Baptists emerged out of this radical reformer milieu in the early 1600s. They first appeared in Holland (among English immigrants) and among separatists in England.

It wasn't long until Baptists were found in the English colonies.

Baptists championed liberty of conscience. Roger Williams was expelled from Massachusetts Bay Colony for insisting that "the commonweal cannot without a spiritual rape force the consciences of all to one worship." Liberty of conscience meant

freedom for every believer to serve and worship God according to the dictates of conscience, freedom for each believer to interpret the Bible under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, freedom of the local church to discern God's will, and freedom of religion for all people. All of these practices had roots in the radical reformation.

From the very beginning, the emphasis on freedom and conscience led to a great deal of diversity within Baptist ranks. Some early Baptists accepted predestination, others rejected it. Some worshipped on Sunday, others on Saturday. Some advocated two ordinances, baptism and Lord' supper, while others added a third, foot washing. Some favored revivals, others ridiculed them. Some defended slavery, others fought it. Some had women preachers and deacons, others rejected them. Some sang hymns, others wouldn't. Baptists have always been diverse and disputes with other Baptists have been frequent.

Within our diversity, however, some core convictions about church life have remained constant:

All genuine faith springs from a voluntary response of trust in Christ

All people have the right to religious freedom

All members of the church are believers who have made a personal commitment to Jesus as Lord and Savior

All members are to interpret the scriptures and help the church discern God's will

All members are gifted to serve as God's ministers or priests

All churches are autonomous and free to cooperate with other churches as they choose

Claiming Our Baptist Heritage

Is this Baptist heritage worth claiming? It is worth claiming for at least three reasons.

Our Baptist heritage is valuable to humanity.

Baptists are Great Commission Christians. We take seriously the Lord's command to make disciples throughout the whole world. Genuine conversions spring from a voluntary response of faith in Christ. We lay the groundwork for the gospel and gain a hearing for the "good news" by advocating the separation of church and state and championing religious freedom for everyone. In an age of religiously motivated wars, terrorism, and genocide, the world desperately needs Baptists to once again become champions for liberty of conscience and religious freedom.

Our Baptist heritage is scriptural.

In the New Testament only believers are baptized and incorporated into the church. Christians form a "royal priesthood" (I Pet. 2:9). As his priests, we have been given diverse spiritual gifts and all the gifts are necessary and valuable to the church's ministry (I Cor. 12:7-27). Likewise, we are equal priests in God's family. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Gal. 3:28). New Testament churches were diverse in practice but found ways to cooperate in mission endeavors (Acts 15:1-35).

The New Testament church did not employ the state to spread the gospel. It used the power of persuasion not coercion. The early church knew that genuine convictions spring from a voluntary response of faith in Christ.

Our Baptist heritage is valuable to the broader Christian community.

Martin Marty, the premier church historian in America and a Lutheran minister, described the "Baptistification" of American Christianity. He suggests that Baptist insights about church life have influenced other denominations in America and transformed the way they operate. Baptists have influenced other denominations to give more authority to the local congregation, to give the laity a more active role in the church, to advocate religious liberty, to allow for greater diversity in biblical interpretation among their members, and to realize the necessity for each member to have an experiential faith.

Our Baptist heritage must be kept whole and healthy in order to continue influencing other denominations. Likewise, Baptists must be willing to listen to and learn from other denominations. It is a two-way street.