

Distinctive Qualities of BAPTISTS

This is the second of three essays discussing the identity of Mount Hermon Baptist Church. Previously we discussed what it means to be a Christian, particularly the Good News of Jesus Christ and our response. Here we will consider what it means to be a Baptist. Finally, we will consider what it means to be a member of Mount Hermon Baptist Church.

Being a Christian speaks to our claim that Jesus Christ is Lord. A quick survey, however, of Christians across time and around the world will reveal the diverse quality of the body of Christ. As Jesus communicated the Gospel in different ways to different people (e.g. a Pharisee, a woman at the well, an invalid, and a hungry crowd in John 3, 4, 5, 6 respectively), so Christians living in different contexts express the Gospel in various ways.

I and my church are part of a fairly young tradition called Baptists. In our context, I believe Baptists have distinct advantages in proclaiming the Gospel. If I found myself in a different continent or a different century, I most likely would be living out my faith in Christ through a different tradition. As we pursue a greater unity in the body of Christ, let us avoid disparaging the differences we find among our brothers and sisters. Nevertheless, we must understand our tradition as Baptists if we are to play our part in the body of Christ faithfully.

Even among Baptists we are pretty diverse. Regarding articles of faith, Mount Hermon Baptist Church has adopted *The Baptist Faith and Message* (1963). Other articles of faith have been recorded during the 400-year history of Baptists, but they all have a set of common identity markers. I have gathered them into an acrostic below.

B	Biblical Authority
A	Autonomy of the Local Church
P	Priesthood of the Believer
T	Two Ordinances
I	Individual Soul Liberty (or Soul Competency)
S	Saved Church Membership
T	Two Offices
S	Separation of Church and State

I will cover each line not in this order but in a way where one concept follows the other.

Individual Soul Liberty

While believer baptism is the most recognized distinctive of Baptists, it is not the most fundamental. Much of what makes us Baptist comes from our emphasis in the idea that each of us has the privilege and responsibility of what we will do with our lives, whether to follow God or not. It is a privilege because no one else can coerce you to follow God or any idol. It is a responsibility because no one but you will be accountable for your decision.

This liberty or freedom of conscience is discussed explicitly in a few passages in Scripture, implicitly in many more. Romans 14 touches upon it and offers a good summary in verse 12, “Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.” When the religious leaders attempted to coerce the apostles into abandoning Jesus’ commands, they responded with, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him?” (Acts 4:19; cf. Acts 5:29)

When living in Kazakhstan, I had many conversations where somewhere along the way the person would say, “I am Kazakh. Therefore, I am Muslim.” Or they would say, “My family is Muslim. Therefore, I am Muslim.” Now living in North Carolina, I hear something similar. “I am American. Therefore, I am Christian.” “My parents raised me in a church. Therefore, I am Christian.” We must disabuse ourselves of the idea that because of our ethnicity, nationality, or family ties, that our soul is secured. It is our responsibility alone to follow Christ, the only one in whom our soul is secured.

Individual Soul Liberty is not only a responsibility but a privilege. We can rejoice that just as God gave Adam and Eve freedom to choose, God has given each person this freedom, including you. The “sins of the father” do not doom us to condemnation. We have the opportunity to turn from whatever the past has doled out and into an abundant life with Christ.

Two Ordinances

To choose to follow Jesus requires that we obey Jesus. During his time with his first disciples, he commanded two practices: baptism and communion (Matthew 28:19 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 respectively). We continue to practice them today as ordinances of Christ. Baptism signifies our decision to follow Christ, leaving our former life and practices and entering into a new life and practices. Communion, or the Lord’s Supper, signifies a reaffirmation of our decision to follow Christ. These ordinances are full of much more meaning, but we do not have time to consider these today.

Because both baptism and communion require the participant to have made a decision to follow Christ, Baptists reserve these ordinances for believers. For this reason you will not find Baptists baptizing infants, for they are unable to communicate their decision to follow Christ. Sometimes people will describe Baptists’ baptism as “adult baptism,” however that is not quite accurate. Rather, it is “believer baptism.” The requirement for baptism is not one’s age but one’s ability to make this decision. And as described above, no one can make this decision for you. Neither a parent nor pastor, spouse nor sibling, culture nor country. Baptism is reserved for those who practice their soul liberty and choose Christ.

Similarly, communion is offered to all who claim Jesus Christ as Lord. At Mount Hermon, we welcome all to leave their pews and walk to the table of our Lord as an act of volition. We are choosing once again to follow Christ to the table. And all those who practice their soul liberty and choose Christ find a place at the table.

Saved Church Membership

The next step for a new believer is membership into the Church. Mount Hermon practices a formal local church membership, but at our baptism we confess to the world that we are members of the Universal Church, the body of Christ, the family of God. Accordingly, Baptists

who practice formal local church membership offer this privilege to all who have shown a commitment to Jesus Christ. Other requirements may be involved as well, for example a general understanding and acceptance of the church's beliefs and polity, but these other requirements are only dependent upon one's confession of Christ as Lord.

Autonomy of the Local Church

As Baptists believe each individual has the privilege and responsibility to follow Christ, similarly each local Baptist church has the privilege and responsibility to follow Christ. Some Christian traditions organize themselves in a way where power comes from the top (as in a pope or king) and flows down to the local church. Baptists organize themselves quite the opposite, with the local church's power flowing into larger associations, conventions, and fellowships.

We describe power seated in the local church as the "autonomy of the local church," but even this description is not quite right. Baptists do not see local churches as autonomous in the sense that the church can do whatever the church wants. Rather, autonomy describes the church's freedom to associate with other local churches without coercion.

Local Baptist churches, while not governed by a pope or king, are nevertheless governed by The King, Jesus Christ. Again, we have the privilege and responsibility to listen to the commands of our King. We listen to the Holy Spirit within us, within our fellow brothers and sisters, and within our Holy Scriptures. With holy submission, we come together as a church and carry out the commands of our King. While an outsider may see us voting on motions during a business meeting and conclude we are a democracy, in fact our votes express not our desires but our King's desires.

There once was a predominantly white Baptist church in the South voting on whether to ordain their first black deacon. One leader of the church protested loudly. His church had always been white, and he wanted it to stay white. The church voted and unanimously called this black brother to be their deacon. Later, the vocal leader was asked about his vote, and he said, "While I did not want him to be our deacon, I knew Jesus did, and my vote belongs to Jesus." Whatever we can say about this church leader, he understood that the church is governed by our King Jesus Christ.

With the understanding the Jesus rules the local church, Baptist churches gather together to form associations that cooperate, especially in missions. In these associations, which can be local, state, national, or international, we practice submission to one another, listening to the voice of Christ in other churches, and work with one another in local projects like a food pantry or more distant ones like funding a missionary.

Autonomy of the local church is a direct outworking of the Baptist belief of individual soul liberty. While this organizational structure is not the only one we find among Christians, Baptists agree that it has been effective in our time and place, and furthermore it has been faithful to how we understand Jesus as the head of the Church and we his subjects. It requires that Baptists continually acknowledge Jesus as King, continually listen to the voice of our King, and continually submit to Jesus and one another.

Biblical Authority

If we are to wield this great freedom in the local church wisely, we must continually be listening for the voice of our King. This means listening to the Spirit within us and within our brothers and sisters. It also means listening to the words of Scripture. No wonder whenever you see a Baptist, a Bible is not far away.

Baptists are known for their Biblical literacy. Bible studies abound in Baptist churches. The Bible has a unique focus throughout worship services, its words use in songs, in liturgical pronouncements, and in its preaching. When a church wanders far from Scripture, the church finds itself wandering from their King.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17) If we find the breath of God in Scripture, God’s voice is not far. If God’s voice is found in and through every page of Scripture, Scripture becomes authoritative in our life. Scripture becomes unique from all other writings, elevated to the level of Holy. And while we do not want to make the mistake of elevating it to the “fourth person of the Trinity,” we acknowledge that when Scripture makes a claim, it should be taken as an authority divinely inspired and authored by the one we follow.

Priesthood of the Believer

Both the Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures claim that God is creating a Kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 61:6; 1 Peter 2:5-9; Revelation 1:6, 5:10, 20:6). A priest is one who stands as representative between two different parties, one party being God. In the Old Testament, the priests represented the people of Israel before God. They petitioned on behalf of the people. In addition, they represented God before the people. They communicated the will of God to them.

In our role as priests, we have the privilege to do the same. We can come before God and pray for one another (Ephesians 6:18; James 5:16; 1 Timothy 2:1). In addition, we are to speak the words of God to one another (Ephesians 6:18; 1 Peter 4:11; Galatians 6:1). The role of priests is an awesome role not to be taken flippantly. It is a role that when practiced draws believers together in an intimate bond, reminding us continually of our dependence on God and one another.

Two Offices

There are two roles, or offices, that are set apart in Baptist churches for special individuals. They are the role of pastor (shepherd) and deacon (servant). As every believer is called to be a priest, so is every believer called to be a servant, and many are called to shepherd. Some, however, are set apart to focus on and exemplify these roles in the church.

The pastor is explicitly listed among other roles in Ephesians 4:11, and the deacon is first described in Acts 6 and later in 1 Timothy 3. Experience has shown that churches thrive when these two offices are utilized. Other offices are mentioned in Scripture, such as apostle, evangelist, prophet, and bishop. Sometimes one will find these offices formalized in Baptist

churches, but rarely will a Baptist church be organized without the two offices of pastor and deacon.

Separation of Church and State

History has demonstrated that when the powers of Church and State collaborated to rule together, it often led to suffering with the loss of identity of both Church and State. Neither flourished unless a healthy separation was maintained. The State cannot coerce citizens to become Christian.

Christians suffered under this coercion in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Individuals who pioneered Baptist thought in America, Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, were banished because they refused to worship as the government dictated. They consequently settled in the Rhode Island colony where religious freedom was available to all who joined them. Years later, as a new country was being formed from these colonies, America's first statesmen and Christian leaders sought to enshrine religious freedom in a few constitutional amendments that would later be called the Bill of Rights. Thomas Jefferson and Pastor John Leland pressed that the powers of the Church and State be separated to ensure the autonomy of both.

A separation of Church and State helps to ensure that none is coerced to receive Christ by the government. Every individual is freed to pursue the individual soul liberty that God has given all people. Being free to say yes to Christ means being free to say no. Coercing people to become Christians will create haters of Christianity or hypocrites. This neither helps the Church or State. Furthermore, Christians are freed to persuade others of the Gospel without being hindered by the government.

Today, "separation of church and state" has been confused with a separation of religion and the public square, thus secularizing all public activity, both governmental and otherwise. Yet those who argued for the First Amendment never argued to sever communication between religion and the public square. Rather, dialogue must be had to ensure healthy separation. Otherwise, government is bound to coerce the population to a set of beliefs, whether it be Christianity, atheism, or secularism.

These are eight distinctives that one can find in most Baptist churches throughout history. I say most because Baptists are notorious for bucking generalizations. It is said that when you bring together two Baptists, you find three opinions. This is my attempt to connect the four hundred years of roots and stems into one tree called Baptist. In my third essay, we will consider what ideas and practices unite the people of Mount Hermon Baptist Church

In Christ,
Pastor Rich Goodier