

# Baptist Theology

AN ESSAY BY

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## DEFINITION

Baptists believe in the Bible as the ultimate authority, a regenerate and baptized church, the autonomy of the local church, and religious liberty for all.

## SUMMARY

This essay discusses the origin of Baptists, their distinctives—biblical authority, regenerate church membership, baptism by immersion, local church autonomy, soul competency and priesthood of all believers, and religious liberty for all people—and their various affinities and affiliations.

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## Introduction

Baptists are one of the few religious groups whose adherents dispute their own beginnings. A minority of Baptists contend that Baptist churches originated in the first century, deducing their claim from the fact that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Other Baptists trace their beginnings to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century who rejected church/state alliances and replaced infant baptism with believer's baptism. The majority of historians, however, argue that the beginnings of the Baptist movement are traced to the seventeenth century when a small group separated from the Church of England and formed a church based on the principle of regenerate membership following believer's baptism. Though the church originated in Amsterdam in 1609, a portion of its members returned to England in 1611 where the Baptist movement took root despite heavy persecution. From those beginnings have arisen hundreds of Baptist groups worldwide.

On the whole, Baptists have much in common with other Christian denominations. They believe there is one God who exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They believe human beings are sinners in need of salvation; that the Father sent his Son, who is fully God and fully man, to die for sinners; and that by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone they become the children of God. Baptists believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world today regenerating sinners and equipping believers. Finally, Baptists believe that God will, in his own time and in his own way, bring the world to an appropriate end; that he will judge the living and the dead; and all who are in Christ will worship him forever.

But there are beliefs that set Baptists apart from other denominations. It is important to note that Baptists are not distinguished by one particular belief, such as baptism; rather, an entire set of beliefs comprise what Baptists hold together as their denominational distinctives. This set of beliefs includes the Bible as the ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice, a regenerate church comprised of baptized believers, recognition of the autonomy of the local church, and religious liberty for all.

## **Biblical Authority**

Baptists are often called “people of the Book” because of their emphasis on the Bible as the sole authority for faith and practice. Baptists often describe the Bible as infallible and many affirm the Bible is inerrant. No other writings are placed alongside the Bible with equal authority, and no single person has the right of final interpretation. Still, Baptists have traditionally adopted confessions of faith to summarize their beliefs about the Bible. A sample of Baptist confessions includes the Second London Confession (1689); Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742); New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833); and the Baptist Faith and Message (1925, 1963, 2000). Modern confessions are specific in key areas (such as the nature of God or the composition of the church) reflecting genuine Baptist unity but are broad in other areas (such as views on election or eschatology) in order to include Baptists despite their differences. Unlike the Bible, confessions can be revised by Baptists to update or clarify their understanding of biblical doctrines.

## **Regenerate Church Membership**

Baptists believe the local church consists of persons professing faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, as the first mention of the word “church” in the New Testament is connected to the confession that Jesus is the Son of God ([Matt 16:13-18](#)). Though they realize that their judgment is fallible, Baptists look for a credible profession of faith before admitting persons to membership. Admitting new members to the church may be as simple as affirming those who come forward during an “altar call” at the end of a service; or it may be more involved with a personal interview or completing a new member’s class. In light of the fact that some professing Christians depart from the church or live lives marked by unrepentant immorality, Baptists historically have used church covenants and practiced church discipline to remove them from membership ([Matt 18:15-17](#)).

## **Believer’s Baptism by Immersion**

Baptists reject infant baptism on the basis of texts such as [Matt 28:19](#), which presumes that only disciples will be baptized. In addition, baptism neither saves nor promises future salvation. Thus they believe that baptism should follow conversion as it is an outward symbol of an inward grace ([Gal 3:27](#)). Baptists believe the proper mode of baptism is by immersion, placing a person entirely beneath the baptismal waters. The basis for this mode is that the Greek word for baptism means “to dip, immerse or plunge.” Also, since symbols are intended to communicate important truths, immersion best symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ ([Rom 6:3-6](#)). Some Baptists, such as Landmark Baptists, recognize only baptisms performed in a Baptist church. A number of Baptists also practice “close communion,” which permits only those who have been baptized as believers to partake in the Lord’s Supper.

## **Local Church Autonomy**

Since [Matt 18:15-17](#) presents the local church as the final court of appeal in determining its membership, Baptists do not empower any entity above the church as having authority over local church affairs. Baptists also operate under a congregational polity wherein the membership has the final word in matters governing the local church. Thus, Baptist churches select their own pastors, determine their operating budget, and own their church property. Although Baptist churches are autonomous, most voluntarily cooperate with one another at various levels including local associations, state and national conventions. Such cooperative efforts enable Baptist churches to do more together than they can do apart, such as training missionaries, providing college and seminary education, mobilizing for disaster relief, and ensuring retirement benefits. Still, the local church is the foundation for associations and conventions, so that neither can intrude nor interfere in the life of a local Baptist church. Other Baptists, such as Independent Baptists, eschew cooperation beyond the local level.

## **Soul Competency and the Priesthood of All Believers**

Soul competency recognizes that every Christian, through the mediation of Jesus, has free access to God ([Heb 4:14-16](#)). Hence, there is no need to go through a priest to have a relationship with God. The priesthood of all believers implies that every Christian is a minister, with no difference between clergy and laity in terms of status and privilege before God. Though every Baptist has a role and a voice in the church, Baptists recognize the need for people who are specifically set apart for ministry. Baptist churches usually follow the structure of pastors, elders, deacons and committees. The qualifications for pastors, elders and deacons are given in [1 Tim 3:1-13](#) and [Titus 1:5-9](#). The majority of Baptists restrict the office of pastor to men ([1Tim 2:12](#)) although other Baptists, such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, believe that women can and should be pastors ([Gal 3:27-29](#)).

## **Religious Liberty for All People**

Baptists have affirmed and defended the right of all people to adhere to the religion of their choice or to reject religious commitments altogether. Baptists believe that all people should be able to practice their faith without constraint and to spread their faith without hindrance. These ideals are best promoted in the context of separation of church and state, which Baptists have affirmed for a number of reasons: religion, in order to be genuine, must be voluntary, not coerced; the church is susceptible to corruption if ruled by the state; politicians do not always understand or appreciate the nuances of theological convictions; and popular opinion can never replace commandments from the eternal God. Religious liberty, therefore, is not a gift of government but a gift from God.

## **Varieties of Baptists**

Although Baptists agree in the main with the theological commitments above, there are distinctives that set a number of Baptist groups apart from each other. General Baptists affirmed a general atonement whereas Particular Baptists affirmed limited atonement. Southern Baptists formed their denomination in reaction to the refusal of the Triennial Convention (a network of northern and southern Baptists) to appoint slave owners as missionaries; the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., was formed after the American Civil War and is the nation's oldest and largest African-American religious convention. Missionary Baptists were actively involved in missions at the turn of the nineteenth century, which gave rise to Primitive Baptists who decried mission agencies as unscriptural rivals to the local church. Landmark Baptists look to the past with their understanding that Jesus founded the Baptist church in the first century, while Seventh-Day Baptists look to the last day of the week as the day when Baptist churches should gather for worship. The Baptist World Alliance is not a denomination but a network of multiple Baptist groups that provides a visible witness to the global presence of Baptists around the world.

## FURTHER READING

*General histories of Baptists include the following:*

- David Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2018).
- Anthony Chute, Nathan Finn, and Michael Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015).
- Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987).

*Books on Baptist principles include the following:*

- Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman, eds., *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015).
- James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009).
- Timothy and Denise George, eds., *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 1996).
- John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2005; revised and expanded edition, 2019).

*Website resources include the following:*

- [Baptist Studies Online](#) is a comprehensive source for primary documents and the *Journal of Baptist Studies*.
- [The Andrew Fuller Center](#) promotes the study of Baptist history as well as theological reflection on the contemporary significance of that history.
- [The Baptist Studies Center for Research](#) provides links to Baptist archives, journals, websites, and news agencies.
- [The Center for Baptist Renewal](#) highlights the Great Tradition of the historic church for the renewal of Baptist faith and practice.

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