

THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

Baptists through the centuries have insisted that the Bible is the sole ultimate written authority for Christian faith and practice. They have resisted those who claimed otherwise, including popes, kings, bishops, pastors, and teachers. Both religious and secular powers have persecuted Baptists for this commitment to the authority of the Bible.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”
2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

Baptists Consider the Bible Authoritative

Basically Baptists have considered the Bible as authoritative for faith and practice because of its very nature. Baptists have insisted that the **divine nature** of the Bible is the basis of its authority. No other writing compares to the Bible. The Bible stands alone among all other writings in that it is uniquely from God and about God.

For much of our history, Baptists have simply accepted the authority of the Bible based on belief in its divine nature. Scriptures were quoted to validate Baptist beliefs and practices without much effort to “prove” the divine nature of the Bible.

However, Baptists and others can point to many evidences of the divine, authoritative nature of the Bible, such as the amazing unity of the Bible in spite of the fact that it was written by a variety of persons over hundreds of years. The fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies such as in the life and teachings of Jesus, the continuing relevance of the Bible’s message over centuries, the power of its message to transform lives and society, and the repeated claims within the Bible to be the word of God further affirm that the Bible is a unique, Holy Spirit inspired book.



The Nature of the Authority of the Bible

Baptists emphasize that the Bible is the sole written authority for Christian faith and practice and deny that other writings such as creeds, confessions of faith, traditions, the teachings of theologians, and the statements by founders of denominations have such authority. Although Baptists may gain insight from and express appreciation for some of these documents, they refuse to accept them as authoritative.

Some have accused Baptists of worshipping the Bible because of their extraordinarily high regard for the Bible as authoritative. Of course, we do not worship the Bible; we worship the God of the Bible as ultimate authority. ***The Bible is authoritative for us because it is from God and about God.***

This is one reason why Baptists often refer to the Bible as our sole **written** authority. God is our ultimate authority. The Holy Spirit inspired persons to write the Bible so that, as The Baptist Faith & Message states, it is a “perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.” As such, the Bible becomes for us a revelation of God.

Jesus Christ is the most complete revelation of God. The Bible reveals Jesus Christ as the Lord of all. The Lordship of Christ and the authority of the Bible go hand in hand; they are not contradictory but rather they are complementary.

Baptists believe that the Holy Spirit empowered persons not only to record truth about God but also to enlighten or illumine persons to interpret and apply the Bible.

The Bible is basically a religious authority. Herschel Hobbs, well-known Baptist pastor-theologian, in the book *The Baptist Faith and Message* on pages 24-25 states, “The Bible is primarily a book of religion.” He explains, “To say that the Bible is an authoritative book does not mean that it is authoritative in every field of human thought. It is not an authority in science. It does not claim to be.” Hobbs also writes, “The Bible lays no claim to being a textbook of history, literature, philosophy, psychology, or science. Yet it contains true elements of all these and more.”

The Authority of the Bible Relates to Other Basic Baptist Beliefs

Because Baptists regard the Bible as the sole written authority for faith and practice, ***the Bible is foundational for Baptist doctrine and church polity.*** Baptist statements of belief through the centuries have always cited Scriptures for each belief set forth.

On the authority of the Bible, Baptists base beliefs in matters such as salvation by grace through faith alone, the priesthood

**From the *Articles of Faith*
adopted in Texas in 1840 by
Union Baptist Association:**

“We believe the Scriptures
of the Old and New Testa-
ment are revealed from God,
and that they contain
the only true system of faith
and practice.”

of all believers, soul competency, believer's baptism, the symbolic nature of baptism and the Lord's Supper, a church membership only of those who have been born again, congregational church governance, the autonomy of churches, religious freedom, and voluntary cooperation for missions and ministry.

Some of these basic convictions relate in a special way to how Baptists view and interpret the Bible. For example, belief in soul competency and the priesthood of all believers leads Baptists to insist that each believer-priest is competent to read and understand the Bible and that the opportunity and responsibility of each believer-priest for reading and interpreting the Bible ought not be delegated to others. Similarly, Baptists insist that no other person or group of persons ought to attempt to assume the right to dictate to others what to believe.

Baptists declare that all people should have the freedom to possess, read, and interpret the Bible for themselves. Based on the life and teachings of Jesus, Baptists insist that faith cannot be coerced and no one should try to do so. Neither should a particular interpretation of the Bible be forced on another.

Interpreting the Bible's Teachings

Is there danger in declaring that all believers should be free to interpret the Bible for themselves? Of course, there is danger; strange, even bizarre interpretations may result because not all persons are equally mature in their Christian growth or equally knowledgeable about principles of biblical interpretation.

But the alternative is even more dangerous: believing that a few persons have the authority to determine what the Bible teaches. After all, who has the authority to place such responsibility in the hands of another person or of a group? Furthermore, Bible scholars differ widely in their interpretations of some parts of the Bible. Who is to determine which interpretations are indeed the correct ones?

Does this mean that a person is free to believe anything he or she wants to about the Bible and its teachings? Baptists declare that they are free to do so, but this does not mean that every interpretation is correct. Baptists insist that a heavy responsibility accompanies this freedom to interpret the Bible. People should study the Bible prayerfully and humbly, depending on guidance from the Holy Spirit. Interpretations of the Bible should be shared with a fellowship of believers to gain insight. Sound principles of interpretation should be used. One's interpretation should be compared to those of mature Christians past and present for possibly gaining a better understanding.

Conclusion

Baptists differ in many ways regarding the Bible. However, when Baptists differ on certain doctrines or practices, they use the Bible as the authority for their position, not some other source. Therefore, although Baptists may disagree about what the Bible teaches about certain doctrines and practices, we agree that the Bible is our sole ultimate written authority for faith and practice.

For further information, see www.baptistdistinctives.org

The basic material in this leaflet originally appeared in a series of articles in the *Baptist Standard* in 2005. Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund to provide for publishing the series. He asked William M. Pinson, Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles. The financial assistance of The Prichard Family Foundation and Vester T. Hughes, Jr. enabled this series of nineteen leaflets to be produced based on the articles. Skyler G. Tinker designed and formatted the leaflets for publication.

Each leaflet is for both individual and group study.

The topics in this series: (1) Baptists: Who? Where? What? Why? (2) What Makes a Baptist a Baptist? (3) The Lordship of Christ; (4) The Bible as Authority for Faith and Practice; (5) Soul Competency; (6) Salvation Only by Grace Through Faith; (7) The Priesthood of All Believers; (8) Believer's Baptism; (9) A Regenerate Church Membership; (10) Congregational Church Governance; (11) Church Autonomy; (12) Baptist Church Life: Organization, Worship, Officers, Ordinances; (13) Voluntary Cooperation; (14) Evangelism; (15) Missions; (16) Ministry; (17) Christian Education; (18) The Application of the Gospel; (19) Religious Freedom.

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