Baptists number in the millions worldwide and profoundly make news. Yet little is known about Baptists by the world in general and what is known is often misunderstood. Even some Baptists are not familiar with Baptist beliefs and practices, heritage, and history. For example, "Did you know..."

Baptist pastor established the first form of governance in America that provided complete religious freedom for all.

the first Baptist missionaries from America were not Baptists when they set sail for the mission field but became Baptists on the way to the mission field.

the first Baptist pastor in England was imprisoned by King James I (of King James Bible fame) for insisting that all persons should have freedom to worship.

the first elected president of the Republic of Texas became an outstanding Texas Baptist layman.

some of the earliest Baptists practiced baptism by pouring and not by immersion but soon determined that the Bible taught immersion is the correct way to baptize.

some early Baptists in America were publicly whipped for including singing in a worship service because such singing was viewed as unspiritual and unhitable.

the first Baptist missionary from the United States to another country was an African-American who had been a slave.

Baptist pastor from Texas preached a sermon from the steps of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C. on religious liberty.

Baptist pastor in Virginia met with James Madison to encourage an amendment to the Constitution of the United States guaranteeing freedom of religion.

the best known evangelist in the world is a Baptist who began his ministry in the mid twentieth century.

that the first person baptized in the Gulf of Mexico as a Baptist when Texas was still an independent nation founded a major milk company.

that a former President of the United States of America and a Nobel Prize recipient is a Baptist layman Sunday School teacher.

that a generous Baptist businessman was the first to develop an effective process for pasteurizing cheese.

that the author of the widely used devotional book My Utmost for His Highest was a Baptist from a devout Baptist family, his father and brother being Baptist pastors.

These "did you know" statements are interesting (there will be more information on them in subsequent articles in this series) but they do not indicate what beliefs and practices characterize Baptists. If someone were to ask you, "What is the one thing that distinguishes Baptists from other Christian denominations?" what would your answer be? Or if you were asked, "What difference does it make being a Baptist Christian?" what would you say? In the coming weeks this series of articles will explore such questions.

Why Is There a Lack of Knowledge about Baptists?

Why do many Baptists today lack understanding of what it means to be a Baptist? Several factors likely have contributed to this lack of knowledge:

- ByPU, BTU, Training Union, and Church Training held on Sunday evenings in churches (the names differed in different eras of Baptist life but the aim of each was to "make disciples") emphasized Baptist doctrine, practice, and history but they do not exist.

- A multitude of people have joined Baptist churches in recent years from other denominations and others have come with little or no church background. In both cases their knowledge of Baptist beliefs and practices is usually limited.

- Some Baptist churches provide little or no help for members to understand what it means to be a Baptist Christian and a Baptist church.

- Some persons believe that denominations are either a thing of the past or of little importance. (The fact is that the Baptist denomination is growing, not fading away, and denominational differences are important.)

"Every Baptist ought to know why he is a Baptist, and to know it from the specific commands of God's Word. Not to have such knowledge is for our churches to be harmed in every way."

George W. Truett, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, 1897-1944

The Growing Interest in Baptist Beliefs

Such a decline in understanding of who Baptists really are, both among Baptists and non-Baptists, has ignited a renewed interest in Baptist beliefs. In fact, no such "official" statement exists. No Baptist speaks for all Baptists. Therefore these articles represent the viewpoint of one Baptist, the author.

The series will deal with basic Baptist convictions and practices, supplying biblical bases and historical background. Topics to be covered include the Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Bible, soul competency, the nature of salvation, the priesthood of believers, believer's baptism, church membership and polity, autonomy, voluntary cooperation, religious liberty and the separation of church and state, and major ways Baptists relate to the world.

Some if not most of these topics are controversial. That is not surprising. Heated differences among Baptists is not new. It has been said that Baptists are not a silent people. Rather Baptists passionately express their convictions. Our commitment to freedom of interpretation and expression leads to differences. Of course, such brief articles cannot adequately deal with these topics. In order to make more information available a website will carry articles and resources on each topic. See www.baptistdistinctives.org.

These articles go forth with the prayer that the end result will be not only better understanding of the who, what, why, when, where, and when of Baptists, but the advancement of the cause of Christ throughout the world.

For more information see www.baptistdistinctives.org.