

BAPTISTS

“Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Ephesians 4:15-16 (NIV)

“For we are God’s fellow workers... .”

1 Corinthians 3:9 (NIV)

The Baptist denomination defies simple descriptions. Baptists do not fit into neat categories. Diverse in many ways, Baptists are defined, not by a single doctrine, but by a group of beliefs and practices. Taken as a whole, these make Baptists a distinct fellowship of Christians. Materials abound concerning Baptists. This article offers only a brief overview.

Who are Baptists?

Baptists are a diverse people.

Racially, Baptists are—“red, yellow, brown, black and white.” Once predominately white, Baptists are now a virtual kaleidoscope of human hues.

Economically, Baptists vary from paupers to billionaires. They live in hovels and mansions. They exist on welfare checks and thrive as entrepreneurs.

Politically, Baptists cover practically the entire spectrum. They serve in numerous government positions and also endure government persecution.

Educationally, Baptists range from illiterate people to brilliant scholars. Baptists include those who have no formal schooling and also those who have climbed to the highest rung of the academic ladder.

Religiously, Baptist congregations worship formally and informally. They are found in groups described as both conservative and liberal.

Culturally, Baptists vary greatly. They differ in diet, apparel and customs. Neither mode of clothing nor style of hair identifies a Baptist. Baptists speak numerous languages and dialects.

Where Are Baptists Found?

Baptists can be found throughout the world.

Baptists live, worship and minister in more than a hundred countries. The Baptist World Alliance maintains as complete a record as exists, but exact statistics on Baptists are difficult to determine. It is estimated that approximately 50 million baptized believers are members of Baptist churches worldwide. Millions more who are not members participate in and benefit from these churches.

The largest concentration of Baptists is in North America. In the United States, Baptists form the largest non-Catholic denomination. Organized in hundreds of associations of churches, conventions, societies and federations, Baptists number between 35 million and 40 million baptized believers.

The second-largest concentration of Baptists is found in Africa, where approximately 7 million Baptists reside. The largest Baptist population is in Nigeria, with over 2 million, and the second-largest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with almost 2 million.

The third-largest group of Baptists lives in Asia, with over 4.5 million members. India has the biggest Baptist population, with approximately 2 million members. Other large groups of Baptists are found in Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines.

The fourth-most-sizeable Baptist population is found in South America, with more than 1.5 million members. The largest number is found in Brazil, where over a million Baptists congregate in almost 8,000 churches.

Baptists exist in smaller but nonetheless meaningful populations in the Caribbean Islands, Central America, the Middle East and Europe, where the largest number

of Baptists are found in the United Kingdom and in nations of the former Soviet Union.

The Baptist denomination is growing worldwide. The fastest-growing population is in Africa, and the second is in Asia. The slowest growth is taking place in Europe and North America, where the Baptist increase was once the greatest.

What are the Contributions of Baptists?

Baptists are not perfect. However, Baptists have made and continue to make many meaningful contributions. Practically every aspect of human life has benefited from these contributions.

Through evangelism and missions, God has used Baptists to help transform the lives of millions of people as they have come to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Baptists minister to a plethora of human hurt—physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual. Baptist hospitals and clinics, child and elder care organizations, disaster-relief groups, counseling centers and numerous other entities bind up broken bodies and spirits, restore shattered lives and contribute to the overall well-being of people of all ages, races and conditions.

Baptists apply the gospel of Christ in various ways to attack ills of society, such as poverty, racism, injustice, crime, hunger, corruption, abuse of women and children, drug addiction and sexual perversion.

Baptists provide numerous educational opportunities to a massive number of people. By furnishing a vast number of books, periodicals and

“The story of the Baptists is eminently worth telling.”

Kenneth Scott Latourette

Former Professor of Missions and World Christianity, Yale University

Internet resources, Baptists enable individuals to garner knowledge. By fostering schools, universities and seminaries, Baptists make available formal academic studies.

Perhaps the most distinctive Baptist contribution has been that of religious liberty and its corollary, the separation of church and state. Historians, both secular and religious, recognize Baptists as leaders in the struggle for religious freedom, a struggle that continues.

Why Do Baptists Function as They Do?

Why have Baptists grown from a handful of people, hounded and persecuted by both religious organizations and governments, to one of the largest denominations in the world? Why have Baptists sacrificed comfort, possessions and even life itself to minister to others and to work for religious freedom for all?

Although no simple answer exists to questions such as these, **the why of Baptist action is rooted in basic Baptist beliefs.** Baptists are a vastly diverse people. Nevertheless, they hold certain basic doctrines and practices in common.

No single doctrine or polity defines Baptists, but taken as a whole, they make Baptists a distinctive denomination. Some of these convictions, such as a belief in God, are held by all Christians. Others, such as belief in congregational governance, are held in common with certain denominations. However, the entire combination of beliefs, polities and practices held by Baptists makes them a unique fellowship of Christians.

Basic doctrines include these: The lordship of Jesus Christ, the Bible as the sole written authority for faith and practice, soul competency, salvation only by a voluntary response of repentance and faith to God’s grace through the gift of his Son, the priesthood of all believers, baptism of believers only and only by immersion and a regenerate (born again) voluntary church membership.

Basic Baptist polities include these: Congregational church governance, the autonomy of Baptist churches and other Baptist entities, two ordinances for churches (baptism and the Lord’s Supper), two officers of a church (pastor and deacon), financial support by the voluntary contribution of tithes and offerings (not by taxes) and worship styles freely chosen under the lordship of Christ.

Basic Baptist practices and emphases include these: Evangelism, missions, ministry, the application of the gospel to all of life and Christian education.

Baptist commitment to religious freedom undergirds all of these doctrines, polities and practices. Voluntarism, never coercion, permeates these convictions. Thus Baptists contend for a free church in a free state.

Conclusion

The Baptist story is colorful and exciting, filled with victory and defeat, sacrifice and success, agreement and dispute. Baptists differ in many ways, but they generally concur on basic beliefs and practices. **As long as Baptists remain true to these core convictions, they will not only endure but also will thrive.**

For further information on Baptists, see www.baptistdistinctives.org.



Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund for the purpose of publishing this series and asked William M. Pinson Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles, who enlisted H. Leon McBeth, William L. Pitts Jr. and James H. Semple to serve as resource people. ©

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