



# Baptist Churches and Baptist Beliefs

## Divisions Among Baptist Churches

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Baptist Christianity is a paradoxical and conflicted force in American religion, politics, and society. On the one hand, Baptists have historically been staunch supporters of church/state separation and freedom of conscience - and many Baptist churches remain so. Southern Baptists, however, have become the largest, most powerful force opposed to church/state separation, personal liberty, and autonomy in America. They were also a powerful defender of slavery and segregation. How did this happen?

### **Baptist Origins**

Baptists today are the third largest Protestant group in the world (after Anglicans and Presbyterians/Reformed/Congregational). Their history can be traced back to the early days of the Protestant Reformation - specifically, the radical wing of the Reformation which was rejected by major Protestant leaders like Luther and Zwingli. Baptists were originally nicknamed "Anabaptists," which means "re-baptists," because the baptism of mature church members rather than children is one of the original defining marks of this denomination - when they first appeared in the United States, this was a particularly radical position to take.

A recognizably modern Baptist movement developed in the 16th century and was split into two groups. One, the General Baptists, believed that the atonement of Jesus was general for all believers. The General Baptists were in fact the "original" modern Baptists, organized when Thomas Helwys founded the first Baptist church in Spitalfields, London, England in 1612. The other group, called Particular Baptists, believed that the atonement of Jesus applied only to a group of elect believers chosen by God.

The former was influenced by Arminianism and was the largest influence on Baptists in the north; the latter was influenced by strict Calvinism and would be the strongest influence on Baptists in the south. The Southern Baptist Convention today is the largest organization of Baptist churches in the world and the largest Protestant denomination in America. It originated in the South, but now its reach includes all 50 states and beyond - in part, some have argued, because of the movement of military families out of the South and through the rest of the country.

### **Baptist Independence**

The importance of the Great Awakening for American religion and politics cannot be underestimated. When this spiritual fervor swept across the countryside, it encouraged people to adopt a more independent stance with regards to religious matters and even made it easier for them to abandon whatever church they were originally raised in. This, naturally enough, proved beneficial for newer, more radical churches like the Baptists.

Those most responsible for the development of the modern Baptist denomination of Christianity were English Puritan John Smyth (c. 1554-1612) in 1609 and Roger Williams in Rhode Island in 1638. Based on the work of these radical Protestants, Baptists adopted an anti-creedal theology in which all authority stems from the Bible.

Common characteristics include: baptism of mature adults rather than children, baptism via full immersion, independence of local churches, and religious revivals.

So strong was the independent streak that the first national Baptist organization wasn't created until 1814. Already in 1845, though, Baptists split over slavery. The Southern Baptist Convention was established in Augusta, Georgia, in order to preserve a religious foundation for human slavery. The reason why Southern Baptists are organized as a "Convention" is that it is not a religious body in the traditional sense; instead, it is more of a congregational body when it comes to both practice and belief. Rather than a united community with a hierarchical leadership, it is *supposed* to be a loose affiliation of Baptist churches that share common attitudes, beliefs, and interests.

## **Baptist Changes**

Technically, the Southern Baptist Convention is not supposed to exert any doctrinal authority over individual churches, but that has changed and this shift in attitude represents one of the most serious and dramatic changes ever in Baptist theology. A church which originated in ideals of radical independence has become a church based around fundamentalist authoritarianism.

Paul D. Simmons, a clinical professor of medical ethics and an ordained Baptist minister, describes the difference between traditional Baptist views and the fundamentalist Southern Baptist Convention:

Moderate Baptists see authority in terms of the roles of persuasion and leadership, not dictatorship. Fundamentalists want a Pope in every pulpit and then a Pope among the lesser Popes which also pertains to your question pertaining to their emphasis on dogma instead of individual interpretation. Women in ministry appeals to the notion of personal calling which in turn is based on the notion of direct relation to God as spirit and lord of the conscience.

The Fundamentalists insist now on an authoritative set of beliefs that are to be held by all the faithful and accountability is to be made to those in positions of authority, namely, seminary Presidents like Mohler and the convention President and other elected and appointed officials. That strategy is totally non-Baptist but is consistent with the Evangelical/Fundamentalist tradition that now dominates the SBC.

These radical changes have disillusioned quite a few Christians. Many churches have formally left the Southern Baptist Convention, becoming completely independent or joining other Baptist organizations. There are also several million "non-resident" members of the Convention. These are Southern Baptists who joined a Southern Baptist church and then moved away, never to be heard from again. Had they joined a new Southern Baptist church, their whereabouts would be recorded. Finally, there are also many churches that have been expelled from the Convention because they have failed to uphold standards on matters such as homosexuality.

Baptists have traditionally been suspicious any ecumenical movements designed to mediate theological differences between denominations, even when it comes to other Baptists. Because of this Baptists have fractured into numerous divisions, sects, and groups. They may agree on many things, but their differences are enough to keep them apart.

**Southern Baptist Convention:** Established in 1845 in order to preserve a religious foundation for human slavery, it has grown to be among the most theologically conservative Baptist groups and, because of that, has also begun to move away from the tradition of individual authority by abrogating the power of individual churches in an attempt to maintain orthodoxy in the beliefs of members.

**American Baptist Church:** Originally known as the Northern Baptist Convention, it was established in 1907. It is currently the fourth largest group of Baptists in the United States and it is also the most liberal. It consists of a federated body of otherwise independent churches which are united in their belief in adult baptism (by immersion) and the independence of local congregations.

Although it originally consisted of around three-quarters the number of churches as the Southern Baptist Convention, through the 20th century the American Baptist Church was afflicted by divisions and schisms. Today, the Southern Baptist Convention outnumbers the American Baptist Church by at least ten-to-one. Other Protestant denominations which divided over slavery, but the Baptists have not and the current theological divide suggests that this won't likely change any time soon.

**National Baptist Convention:** established in 1895 it is currently the largest black denomination in the United States. It, along with other independent African-American Baptist churches, was created by free slaves after the Civil War and have long played an important role in the political and social lives of African-Americans. Freed slaves were attracted to Baptist churches because of their evangelistic zeal, accessible theology, and an ecclesiology that emphasized individual freedom (political and spiritual) from white authority.

**Independent Baptist Churches:** There are several million Baptists in America who are “unaccounted for.” This means that they are not members of a known Baptist organization. Baptists have traditionally been suspicious any ecumenical movements designed to mediate theological differences between denominations, even when it comes to other Baptists, so it's only to be expected that there will be Baptist churches who continue to be under the radar of religious surveys.

**International Baptist Churches:** Although Baptist churches can be found all over the world, in most places they are not as well organized as they are in America. For the most part the individual churches are scattered widely — so much so, in fact, that it often makes more sense to talk about continent-wide Baptist organizations rather than national or regional organizations. Even in England, where modern Baptists got their start, their numbers have been reduced to a few tens of thousands.

The one country outside of the United States where Baptists play a very public role is Russia, but that is also the country where their position is the most vulnerable. Baptists believe in evangelization but the Russian Orthodox Church objects strongly to “outsiders” who take away adherents.

A principle characteristic of Anabaptist groups was the rejection of infant baptism, which was normal in the Catholic Church, and the insistence that only willing adults should or could be justifiably baptized. This was because infants could not make a conscious profession of Christian faith, whereas adults could. Early on adults were simply baptized by a sprinkling of water, but later this was changed to full immersion in water, just like it is described in the New Testament.

At the time, such rebaptism as an adult was a crime punishable by death. One popular method of execution was drowning, seen as ironically appropriate because of the reformers' interest in baptizing with water. Manz himself was became of the first martyrs by being drowned on the orders of the Zurich town council. He was not, however, the last. Some estimates place the number of martyrs at around 50,000 by 1535, and it may be that other Christians killed more Anabaptists than Romans killed Christians during their 300 years of persecutions.

Because the Anabaptists were viciously persecuted wherever they were and often had to flee their homes, many came to regard the baptism rite not simply as an initiation into the Christian faith, but also as an initiation into Christian suffering. The persecution only backfired, however, because it served to increase the spread of their ideas through more towns and cities. Thus, the harder the authorities pushed, the more this faith was able to spread and attract new converts.

Partially as a result of their persecution and deaths at the hands of the authorities, these groups were generally pacifistic, refusing to harm others. What is also interesting is that they rejected the close cooperation which existed between church and state during this era — Anabaptists were very consciously cutting themselves off from the rest of society.

But if Anabaptists were pacifists and eschewed all violence, why were they treated so violently by others? Anabaptists regarded themselves as citizens of the “Kingdom of God” first and citizens of civil society second. They refused to take oaths and refused to recognize the authority of the state. Anabaptists were radical egalitarians - everyone in the group was completely equal, poor and rich, men and women. This posed a fundamental challenge to the nature and harmony of medieval society — something completely unacceptable to the secular and religious authorities of Europe.

Some Anabaptists went even further than preaching egalitarianism in principle or forming a small commune. A number believed that the Day of Judgment was close at hand — a belief which was continually reinforced by the persecution they suffered. Melchior Hoffman (1495-1543) was a Luther pastor who not only believed that the Day of Judgment was coming, but that it would happen in 1534 when he went to Strassburg and imprisoned. Despite the fact that he went to Strassburg in order to fulfill the prophecy and he did land in prison, nothing happened.

Even more radical Anabaptists gathered in the city of Münster between 1533 and 1555. Here, influenced by the teachings of Jan Matthys (a follower of Hoffman) and Jan Bockelson, they instituted what they labeled “New Jerusalem.” They created a dictatorship and a communistic theocracy which Matthys lead through regular revelations from God.

Aside from the predictable executions of critics, these revelations also told Matthys to impose a new form of polygyny on the population because there was an excess of women and a dearth of men (many were killed by the authorities). Matthys himself took fifteen wives. The city was besieged and in June 1535, the opposing armies entered. Women and children were permitted to flee, but the men were all slaughtered — thousands of them. Leaders like Bockelson were captured and tortured to death.

Although Baptist churches have been continually fractured and divided over the centuries, there are a number of broad characteristics which are common to most if not all. These characteristics include adult baptism through full immersion, evangelism, pietism, and sectarianism. All of these are intimately related to another characteristic: radical voluntarism and the independence of local churches.

**Voluntarism:** Although the group is named for their position on baptism, in fact it is their position on voluntarism and the independence of local churches which may be the most important characteristic of Baptist churches. Baptist tradition holds that authority in matters of religion and faith rests first with the individual baptized believer and second with the local congregation of believers — not a religious hierarchy, religious tradition, or even religious texts.

This is commonly known as “Soul Freedom“ and is the belief that everyone is personally and individually responsible for relating to God — no one can “mediate” between humanity and God. Once a person is old enough to choose baptism, they are also old enough to take responsibility for their own relationship with God. Thus, anything that might be considered a “creed” comes from below rather than being imposed from above.

This doesn’t mean that every person is their own church; instead, it means that there can be no voluntary community of faith without free individuals acting autonomously and acting upon their own conscience. There can be no compulsion in religion: a person comes to a relationship with God freely or not at all. Baptist leader E.Y. Mullins said, “Human personality is the only adequate medium for the self-revelation of a personal God.”

**Infant Baptism:** This voluntarism is closely connected to the Baptist position on baptism. Baptist churches today can, in part, trace their roots back to the Anabaptist movement of the Protestant Reformation. The name anabaptist derives from Greek terms for re-baptism and was originally a epithet and insult but it was eventually accepted as a badge of honor. Baptists believe that it would be inappropriate to baptize a child when it is still too young to freely choose its own path in life.

**Evangelism:** Baptists believe strongly in the importance of evangelism and missionary work. Sometimes Baptist groups seem to be involved more in evangelism than anything else. This evangelism includes local revival meetings, national revival crusades, and international missionary efforts. Because Baptists believe that a person must freely and voluntarily come into a relationship with God and that without this a person's soul will be lost, it is only natural that they would focus on spreading their message to everyone.

**Pietism:** The strain of pietism in the Baptist tradition is also dependent upon Baptist beliefs about voluntarism. Pietism emphasizes a person's direct encounter with God, something which is thought to protect believers against autocratic and dictatorial powers that would subvert true religion. At the same time, pietism can lead to zealous beliefs that have led to the fracturing of Baptist churches around the world.

**Sectarianism:** Finally, Baptist sectarianism can be traced directly to Baptist voluntarism. Baptists have traditionally been suspicious of any ecumenical movements designed to mediate theological differences between denominations, even when it comes to other Baptists. Despite the existence of many common characteristics, there are still also many differences between the various Baptist churches — differences which would be difficult to overcome even if there were an interest in compromise. Today, for example, the American Baptist Association rejects all ecumenical efforts and objects to Baptist churches that act in a “denomination” rather than “sectarian” fashion.

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