

Behold, O Lord, My Days Are Made

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892)

Behold, O LORD, my days are made
a handbreadth at the most;
ere yet 'tis noon my flow'r must fade,
and I give up the ghost.

Then teach me, Lord, to know mine end,
and know that I am frail;
to heav'n let all my thoughts ascend,
and let not earth prevail.

What is there here that I should wait,
my hope's in Thee alone;
when wilt Thou open glory's gate
and call me to Thy throne?

A stranger in this land am I,
a sojourner with Thee;
oh be not silent at my cry,
but show Thyself to me.

Though I'm exiled from glory's land,
yet not from glory's King;
my GOD is ever near at hand,
and therefore I will sing.



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ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

What Is a Baptist?

Kevin T. Bauder

Baptists are certainly not the only Christians. Christians are defined by their belief in the gospel, which includes their commitment to Jesus Christ and their trust in His finished work. Genuine Baptists confess the gospel and all that it entails, but so do other Christians.

What makes Baptists different from those other Christians? Baptists are defined by their ideas and their practices. The ideas and practices that make Baptists unique are called the *Baptist distinctives*.

Many Baptists have published lists of their distinctives. Some are longer and others are shorter, but they all share the same, basic ideas. Here is a brief list that covers the most important Baptist teachings and practices.

New Testament Authority

Like other genuine Christians, Baptists hold the Bible in high esteem. They believe that it is God's word, inspired, inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient for belief and practice (2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:19–20). But they also consider that not everything in the Bible is equally applicable to the church. The part that is addressed specifically to the church begins after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus said He was going to build His church in the future (Matt 16:18). The Church could only become Christ's body until He had risen as its head (Eph 1:19–23). The Church could only become Christ's bride after He gave Himself for her so that He might present her to Himself (Eph 5:25–27). The Church as the body of Christ could have no members until they were baptized into it by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13).

The Church is a New Testament institution. Only the New Testament teaches what the Church is or what its mission, leadership, ordinances, and order are. Only the New Testament says how to measure its success. Therefore, Baptists look only to the New Testament for the faith and order of the Church.

Believer Immersion

Baptists are known best for the way they practice water baptism. Here they differ from other Christians in two important ways. These ways are usually called the *subjects* and *mode* of baptism.

As to subjects, Baptists baptize only believers. They have several reasons for this practice. One is that Scripture links the meaning of baptism with the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom 6:3–5; 1 Pet 3:21). Another is that the New Testament clearly shows that baptisms follow the profession of faith (Acts 2:41; 8:36–37; 10:43–48; 16:14–15). On the other hand, the New Testament does not offer a single example of any infant or other unbeliever receiving Christian baptism. Baptists will not adopt a practice for which they have no New Testament authority.

Second, Baptists insist that baptism can only be done by single immersion. Their reason is twofold. First, the Greek verb *baptizein*, which is translated *to baptize*, literally means *to immerse*. Second, the mode of baptism ought to correspond to its meaning. If the meaning of baptism is symbolically linked with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, then only immersion can fulfill this picture.

Pure Church Membership

Another distinctive of Baptists is the requirement of pure church membership. This requirement entails three elements. First, one must offer a credible testimony of salvation to be eligible for membership in a Baptist church (Acts 2:41; Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2). Second, one must submit to water baptism to be received as a member of a Baptist church. The New Testament makes no provision at all for unsaved or unbaptized church members.

Third, members of Baptist churches must conduct their lives in a way that is free from scandalous behavior (1 Cor 5:11). This requirement does not mean that Baptist church members must be sinless. It means that churches will disfellowship members who engage in certain forms of scandalous conduct and who will not repent. When they do repent, Baptist churches restore them to fellowship (2 Cor 2:5–10).

Individual Christian Responsibility

This distinctive includes two elements. One is called the *priesthood of the believer*. The other is called *soul liberty*.

The priesthood of the believer means that the New Testament allows for no separate or formal priesthood other than the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ (1 Tim 2:5; Heb 10:1–25). In other words, through Jesus, every believer has the right of direct approach and access to God. Also, every believer has the right to intercede as a priest for every other believer.

Soul liberty means that each believer answers directly to God for both belief and conduct. Therefore, each believer has the privilege and responsibility of understanding God's word directly and personally. While soul liberty does not eliminate the need for teachers, it does place the responsibility upon every believer to understand and obey God.

Congregational Polity

Baptists affirm that under Christ, each congregation must govern itself. Externally, a New Testament church is never under the authority of a pope,

a monarchical bishop, a synod, a presbytery, a council, or any other individual or group. Internally, pastor-bishop-elders teach the congregation. Deacons serve the congregation. But all decisions for the congregation are made by the congregation—that is to say, by the church itself. No church can ever delegate its decision-making authority in such a way that decisions are not subject to review by the congregation.

In the New Testament, churches chose their own servants and called them into account (Acts 6:1–7; 13:1–3). They defined their own doctrines (1 Tim 3:15). They exercised authority over their own members to disfellowship them (1 Cor 5) and to restore them to fellowship (2 Cor 2:5–11). These are the most important decisions that a church can make. If a congregation is competent to decide these issues, then it is competent to decide any issue (1 Cor 6:1–4).

Separation of Church and State

Matters of faith and conscience require submission to the commands of God. To be acceptable to God, obedience must flow from a willing heart. In both testaments, Scripture condemns people who go through religious motions without heart engagement (Isa 1:10–20; James 2:1–26). God wants people who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. (John 4:23–24). True religion can never be coerced; rather, individuals must be persuaded in their own minds (Rom 14:5).

Baptists understand this principle to mean that the state has no right to enforce matters of faith. Civil authorities are responsible to maintain order, rewarding good behavior and punishing destructive behavior (Acts 18:12–17; 25:10–11; Rom 13:1–6). Forcing people to worship against their consciences, or forbidding them from worshipping according to their consciences, causes them to sin. Whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom 14:23). Baptists insist that civil governments must keep out of matters of faith. By the same token, churches must never seek to make civil authority an instrument of their own advancement or for the defeat of unbelief.

Conclusion

Much more could be said about each of these distinctives. Indeed, whole books have been written on the subject. But this list provides a rough-and-ready index of those teachings that set Baptists apart from other Christians.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
