

HISTORY SPEAKS

To Hard Questions Baptists Ask

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS.

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Who Is a Baptist?

Thomas R. McKibbens

What is a Baptist? A strange bird, some would say! A Baptist is a person of any race, gender, language, economic, or ethnic background. A Baptist may live in any region of the world, have any physical characteristic, be healthy or not, educated or not, famous or infamous.

What makes a person a Baptist rests fundamentally on the freedom to make a choice. That choice can be described in many ways, but Baptists are fond of the word "call." It has to do with Christ's invitation to follow a way of life that he demonstrated and taught. That call was first made verbally to men and women described in the New Testament, a beckoning that has been extended to ordinary people throughout history. A positive answer to that beckoning is the first step toward becoming a Baptist.

The invitation to follow the way of Christ and the individual response to that call are personal. A Baptist recognizes that there is no one standing between the one calling and the one receiving the call. No family member, church, priest, government, or friend can answer that call for another. Baptists have historically believed that a personal response to the call should not be dictated by ecclesiastical or governmental powers. A personal decision to follow the way of Christ sets any person on the road to becoming a Baptist.

As the name suggests, a Baptist has a unique position regarding the rite of baptism. Baptists are insistent on the timing of baptism. In particular, a Baptist believes that the time for baptism is after, not before, a person says yes to the invitation to follow the way of Christ. Due to an historical aversion to faith statements made by one person or body on behalf of another, Baptists have insisted that the candidate for baptism be mature enough to decide to follow the way of Christ.

A Baptist cares about the symbolism of baptism. Identification with Christ in his life, death, burial, and resurrection is expressed through the symbol of total immersion. A Baptist understands that symbolism, not as a magical act, but as a powerful experience of identification with Christ. The high value placed on the unhindered freedom of the individual to decide to follow the way of Christ is equally paired with a value on freedom for every person to practice religious belief or non-belief without governmental or ecclesiastical interference. From the origin of the movement in the seventeenth century, Baptists have sacrificed for and supported religious freedom and the separation of church and state.

A Baptist also has a particular view of the church that is distinctive from that of many other Christian traditions. Defining the local church as a freely gathered congregation of followers of Christ, Baptists in most cases do not seek permission to assemble from any judicatory or government official. Rather, a congregation is free to declare itself an authentic church, without any succession of bishops, due only to the gathering of Christians to worship and work together, seeking to follow the way of Christ. While Baptists cooperate with other Baptist and ecumenical bodies to accomplish purposes that a local church cannot do alone, a Baptist insists that the local church is free to call its own leaders and to determine the scope and direction of its ministries by congregational vote.

Due to the high value placed on individual freedom and local church autonomy, Baptist polity has historically supported the emergence of both inclusive and exclusive congregations and larger associations of churches. Freedom is a highly valued foundation of Baptist life, marked by the diversity of belief and ministry. Wherever one finds actions of justice, healing, caring, and compassion, one is likely to find Baptist engagement.

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