

# Towards a Baptist identity: A Statement Ratified by the Baptist Heritage Commission in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, July 1989

**Source:** Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993), appendix 1, pp. 63-66.

This statement, in Shurden's judgment, is the single best statement of the Baptist identity issued by a group of Baptists in the twentieth century. It comes from the Commission on Baptist Heritage of the Baptist World Alliance and was ratified by the Commission in July, 1989. It deserves wide circulation as an excellent representation of Baptist beliefs and commitments. The document may also be found in William H. Brackney (ed.), *Faith, Life and Witness: The Papers of the Study and Research Division of The Baptist World Alliance, 1986-1990* (Birmingham, AL: Samford University Press, 1986).

## **Preamble**

This statement on Baptist identity was produced by the Commission on Baptist Heritage as a working document for the 1986-90 Quinquennium and arises out of a brain-storming exercise at their Singapore meeting. It is deliberately intended to be a descriptive rather than a credal statement, and it is recognized that there may well need to be flexibility in translation for use in particular local situations.

## **The Scriptures**

Baptists start with the Scriptures, which afford us God's self-revelation, first in the unfolding of a concern for His People, but supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures, as related by the Holy Spirit to our contemporary situation, are our authority in all matters of faith and practice.

## **What is the Gospel?**

Men and women everywhere are alienated from God and from the world as God designed it. The Biblical word for this is Sin, which the Bible says is so serious that we cannot remedy this condition ourselves: there must be a radical new start which, in John 3, Jesus calls the "new birth." The first word of the Christian gospel must always be Grace: not what we aspire to do but what God has done for us without any claim or work on our part. The grace of God, expressed in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, makes possible the restoration of the relationship with God that sin has spoiled. But this grace which is God's free gift to all of us, like every other gift, has to be received or accepted for its purpose to be secured. This is the response that the Scriptures call Faith: a free, total and unconditional entrusting of our lives to Almighty God. We are invited to put our trust in Jesus Christ because, in Him, God has reached out to touch our sinful humanity.

Clearly this is an action that no one can take for anyone else – each individual must make a free and unfettered response for him/herself. Equally clearly, that act of trust must involve an intention to obey God's declared will, for unless this be so, the word trust is evacuated of all possible meaning and effectiveness.

## **What is the Church?**

Unlike many others, Baptists do not define the church in terms of structures of ministry or by the regular celebration of the ordinances. Rather, they believe that as individuals come to put their trust in God and confess Christ as Savior and Lord, (which they believe to be the scriptural conditions for baptism) so the church is created. This is why they have been advocates of what has been called the Believers' Church or the Gathered Community (of believers gathered out of the world). From this conviction as to the nature of the church as constituted by believers covenanting together in common confession of the name of Jesus, it is seen that their practice of confining baptism (by immersion) to believers only, is entirely logical.

A local church so constituted represents in any place the church in that locality; it is fully the church, not a branch of some national or wider institution. Under the Lordship of Christ and before the open Scriptures, it is competent, when properly summoned, in church meeting to govern itself, to determine a strategy for mission in its locality, and to appoint its ministers (deacons and pastors) and other officers. These officers will serve its interests and execute its will in matters pastoral, educational and practical, but the first authority for all decision-making in a Baptist church must remain in whole church meeting.

Baptist churches reject all state interference in their activities. Each local church is free, and indeed duty-bound by the concerns of the gospel, to enter into covenant relationship with other Christians, both nationally and locally. In Baptist life, relationships have traditionally been in associations, conventions and unions, in support of missionary work at home and abroad, and internationally through the Baptist World Alliance.

Baptists ordain men, and in some, but not all parts of the family, women to the Ministry of the Word, and expect their ministries to be respected for their sacred calling. The witness and service of the church is not seen by Baptists, however, as exclusively the work of the ordained ministry but as inclusively the responsibility of the whole membership.

Most Baptists find no difficulty in a lay person celebrating at the Lord's Table or in the Baptismal Pool, ordinances which are seen by Baptists as symbolic of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and of each believer's identification, by faith, with Him, in both dying to sin and rising to new life in Him. This same Christocentric gospel is preached from Baptist pulpits Sunday by Sunday, for proclamation retains a central place in Baptist worship.

## **What is Discipleship?**

Personal commitment is the starting point for every Christian, yet all need to discover the corporate dimension of the church: in common worship, in generous giving to fellowship needs, and in loyal participation in the mission of the local church.

Baptists are an evangelistic people who have always been committed to sharing their faith, to the extension of the church, and for the last two hundred years to overseas mission as well. In the name of their Lord they have given themselves to the care of the needy and oppressed. Increasingly in the twentieth century (although also in earlier times), they have seen the need to speak and act prophetically, denouncing structural evil wherever it puts God's "Shalom" at risk. Opposed to

everything that denies the rule of Christ, some even suffer imprisonment and martyrdom for their steadfast witness, imposing an obligation on all the family to support them in both prayer and action.

Recognizing the vast demands of Christian witness and discipleship, Baptists have always been a praying people, in both corporate prayer and in encouraging a pattern of individual spirituality that requires each church member to engage in regular prayer and Bible study, for the whole of Scripture rather than abstracted creed is for Baptists the determinant alike of corporate belief and individual action.

Because Baptists delay baptism until an individual has made a personal confession of faith, they are especially concerned for the Christian nurture of children and young people until they come to acknowledge Christ as Savior for themselves, thus fulfilling promises made at services of thanksgiving and blessing that they have become a common celebration of the gift of children among Baptists.

Baptists were among the first to campaign for liberation of opinion and religious practice, not only for themselves but for all people, including the unbeliever, for they believed that each individual needed to be free to make choices about faith and commitment unfettered by any outside agency. Such freedom has led the Baptists to be a diverse people with no over-arching rule demanding common thought or practice among them. But amidst that diversity there is a unity because freedom from the state or from ecclesiastical hierarchies has also meant freedom to develop in each situation a style of churchmanship which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they believe best serves the interests of the kingdom.

Many of the characteristics described here, if not all, are held by other Christian groups. Baptist distinctiveness is best seen in holding all these attitudes together in a way that is at once loyal to the traditions of Reformed Christianity without being sectarian. They are aware that they are but one part of the whole family of Christ's church here on earth, and seek in different ways (some within and others outside formal ecumenical structures) to lend support to the whole of the Church's work at the witness to the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed.

**Baptists are:**

- members of the whole Christian family who stress the experience of personal salvation through faith in Jesus, symbolized both in baptism and the Lord's Supper;
- those who under the Lordship of Jesus Christ have bonded together in free local congregations, together seeking to obey Christ in faith and in life;
- those who follow the authority of Scriptures in all matters of faith and practice;
- those who have claimed religious liberty for themselves and all people;
- those who believe that the Great Commission to take the Gospel to the whole world is the responsibility of the whole membership.