

A Guide to

Baptism and Church Membership

Canadian Baptists of Ontario and
Quebec
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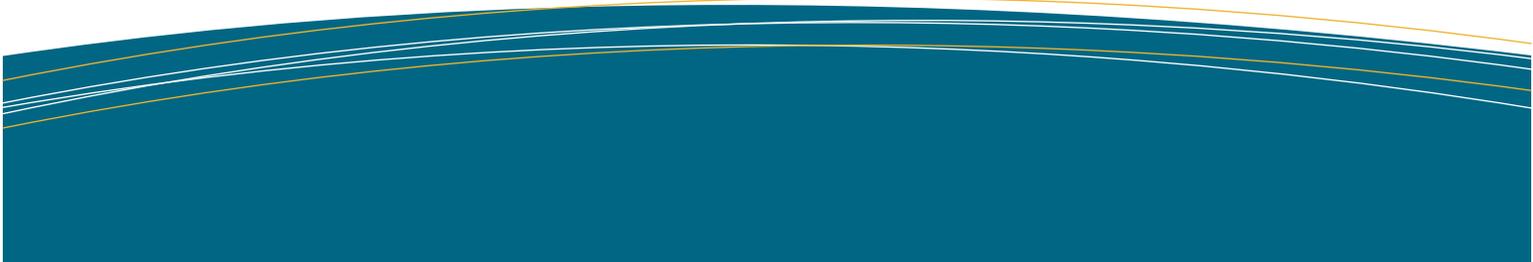


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Notes

- It is intended that each member of your group have a copy of this material as you investigate Baptism and Church Membership together.
- Additional resources for leaders are available in a separate document.
- All scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers 1989).

In The Beginning

Everything begins with God!

The Bible begins with God: *In the beginning when God...*(Genesis 1:1) Creation begins with God: *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth.* (Genesis 1:1) And our story - the Christian story - begins with God who ...*so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* (John 3:16)

Eternal life! Life now and forever! Abundant life! Satisfying life! That is what God has always wanted for us since the beginning of creation.

Read: Genesis 1:26-31

Q: What does it mean to be made in the image of God?

e.g. What is God like? How are we like God?

In the beginning humankind lived in harmony with God and with the rest of creation. People didn't know there was any other way to live - but there was.

Read: Genesis 3:1-24

God always wanted humankind to live forever - Adam and Eve were never forbidden fruit from the Tree of Life - but God didn't want people to live like **this** for all eternity. Their open and honest relationship with God was broken. Their harmony with one another went sour as they blamed someone else for their own actions. They became more concerned with caring for themselves than the plants and animals they were given to tend. These people were ashamed of themselves and tried to cover up who they were and what they had done.

Part of being made in the image of God is having the freedom to choose what we will think and say and do. God's respect for that freedom is enormous and God doesn't just take it away when we make choices that hurt ourselves or other people or parts of creation. God designed humankind and knows how we need to behave in order to enjoy life to the full but Adam and Eve chose a different way and it was draining the life out of them.

That is what sin does. Anytime we use words, perform actions or hold attitudes that are not in line with God's way and anytime we fail to behave according to God's image, we damage our relationships with God, ourselves and others and we experience disappointment, anger, regret, sorrow and dismay.

This is not living as God intended, this is dying and God didn't want human life to go on like this forever so God made Adam and Eve leave the garden. But God never left them and God began to provide a way to escape from sin and death so that we can enjoy eternal life as God has always wanted.

In spite of the choices we make, God never stops loving us and never stops wanting us to have life bursting with so many good relationships and experiences and other wonderful things that they spill out onto others. God still wants us to be like him so that we can get the most out of life.

So salvation also begins with God and it comes to us through God's Son, Jesus Christ, who was there in the beginning with God too.

Read: John 1:1-4, 12-14

Q: What does it mean that “the Word became flesh and lived among us”? Does it have anything to do with our gaining eternal life or reflecting the image of God?

Read: Hebrews 1:3a; 2:14-18

Jesus shows us exactly what God is like through his own words and way of life and, because he became “like his brothers and sisters in every respect,” he demonstrates that it is possible for us to reflect God's image too. We can become the people God had in mind from the beginning of creation. We can experience life as God planned it!

Read: Colossians 1:13-16, 19-20

Sin is what has been draining the life out of us ever since people first chose to behave in ways that were different from God's. Sin is what God set out to abolish so that we could enjoy life in all its fullness. This is what God wants for us because God loves us.

Read: Romans 5:6-8; 6:10-11, 17-18, 22-23

Remember that God values our freedom to choose how we will behave. Even though God has done everything necessary to eradicate sin, we are expected to choose actions and attitudes that are in line with what God knows will give us life.

Read: Philippians 2: 5-8

Q: What is the mind of Christ? What were Jesus' attitudes to God and to other people? How did Jesus treat others?

Consider the following four encounters Jesus had with men and women who were not well liked within their society to learn more about “the mind of Christ.” Reflect upon our own society. Are there comparable situations in our time and place?

Read: Luke 19:1-10

Tax collectors were well known to cheat people. They collected more than the government required and kept the extra for themselves. If the tax collector was Jewish, he was considered a traitor to God and his people because he worked for the Roman Emperor as well as being a

cheat. As far as the Jews were concerned, tax collectors were not people with whom to be associated.

Q: What was it about Zacchaeus that people didn't like? How did Jesus treat Zacchaeus? How does Jesus want us to treat people who cheat or hurt others?

Read: Mark 1:40-42

The worst skin disease in Biblical times was called leprosy. It caused the skin to go scaly and scabby and large sections of skin would peel off including eyelids. Fingers and toes would sometimes become infected and fall off. People believed it was highly contagious and forced lepers to live outside the city where they couldn't make other people sick.

Q: What was it about the man with the skin disease that people didn't like? How did Jesus treat the man with the skin disease? How does Jesus want us to treat people who are sick in ways that frighten us?

Read: John 4:1-30

Jewish social laws had a lot to say about who was allowed to associate with whom. For example, men were not allowed to speak to women in public and Jews were not allowed to interact with Samaritans. Although their races were related, Jews believed that Samaritans had been disloyal to God centuries ago and were no longer counted among God's people. Jews considered Samaritans to be the scum of the earth.

Q: What was it about the Samaritan Woman that Jewish people didn't like? How did Jesus treat the Samaritan Woman? How does Jesus want us to treat people others say we should shun? Read: John 8:1-11

The Jewish law has very strict laws about family life and very harsh punishments for people who do things that hurt the family like marital unfaithfulness - having a sexual relationship with someone other than your husband or wife. Death by stoning was the common end of women who were caught in adultery.

Q: What did people have against the woman caught in adultery? How did Jesus treat the woman? How does Jesus want us to treat people who have done something wrong?

The example of Jesus' own life is a powerful demonstration of what it means to be made in the image of God. The principles he taught us to follow if we want to experience life as God intends it to be are important too.

Read: Luke 6:31 (Golden Rule) and Luke 10:27 (Great Commandments)

In other words, treat other people the way you would like to be treated yourself. These are two of the teachings that make Christianity different from other religions. Lots of religions teach the idea that, "If you don't want someone to do something to you, don't do it to them." That is true of Christianity as well but our faith goes a step further, past what we should avoid and into what

we should go out of our way to do: If you want someone to be your friend when no one else will, look for people in the same situation and go out of your way to be their friend. If you want someone to comfort you when you are sad, go out of your way to comfort someone else when they are sad. If you like it when someone says an encouraging word to you, go out of your way to say encouraging words to others. Jesus also told a number of parables to help us know how to behave like him. Consider these five:

Read: Matthew 13:24-30

We are bound to live among people who don't want to be like Jesus so we need to be aware that it is not going to be easy but we will be rewarded in the end for staying true to Jesus' way.

Read: Matthew 13:31-33

Our small efforts to live by Jesus' example can have a positive influence on many other people.

Read: Matthew 18:21-35

We need to forgive others if we expect God to forgive us.

Read: Matthew 25:14-30

God expects us to make good use of the gifts he gives to us so our talents and skills may grow and develop and we can be all that God has in mind for us to be.

Read: Luke 10:30-37

God expects us to help anyone in need no matter what gender, race, religion, etc. they may be. These are life-giving actions and attitudes, examples of how God wants us to behave so that we will get the most out of life. Jesus showed us and taught us how to live as people made in the image of God and assured us that we can live that way too but we can't do it on our own. We have been following our own way far too long and know this is true. We need to invite Jesus to come and live in our heart if we want to experience life in all its fullness. Read these words spoken by Jesus during his last supper with his closest disciples:

Read: John 14:15-17 and John 17:25-26

This was God's dream for us in the beginning. Being made in the image of God, we would get the most out of life by following God's way, which is the best thing for us, and live forever without sin to mar our relationships or behaviour toward God, ourselves and others. That dream can be realized if we ask God to forgive our sins, invite Jesus to live in our hearts, and make up our minds to follow his example, live God's way and accept the gift of eternal life. If you have already done these things or are prepared to take these steps now, you may be ready to express your decision through Baptism.

Baptism

Baptism is one of two rituals Jesus told his followers to perform. The other is Communion which we will consider in another part of this study. We call them “ordinances” because Jesus ordered us to observe them.

Read: Mark 1: 4-5; 7-11

The word “baptize” comes from a Greek word that simply means to immerse or dip or dunk something under the water. Literally speaking, we “baptize” our dishes when we wash them in the sink, we “baptize” our clothes when we put them in the washing machine, we “baptize” ourselves when we jump into a swimming pool. In the English language, the word “baptize” tends only to be used in a religious sense but it still contains a great deal of the literal meaning of that word - to dunk under the water.

John was baptizing people in the Jordan River which runs through the desert in Palestine. Water is one of the main ingredients in baptism. The idea of washing to make something clean runs all through the Bible and it plays a big part in the religious use of the word “baptism”.

Read: Psalm 24:3-5

These verses tell us that only those people with clean hands and pure hearts who are devoted to the Lord God are able to come into the presence of God.

The Bible often uses the words head, hands, and heart to describe a whole person. The head represents the mind - what we think and what we say. The hands represent our actions - the things we do. And the heart represents our attitudes and motivations - what we believe and why we behave the way we do. So “those with clean hands and pure hearts” are those whose actions and attitudes are pleasing to God.

The Old Testament books of the Bible often use the picture of washing our body as a symbol of purifying our thoughts, actions and attitudes, of taking away the "wrong" in our lives so that we will be free to live "right" in the eyes of God.

Read: Isaiah 1:11, 15-18

According to this passage, we can begin to make ourselves clean by changing our actions – stop doing evil, learn to do good; and changing our attitudes - worshipping God is not about what we do in church but how we live and treat other people day by day. We have some responsibility in making ourselves clean but we can’t take our sins away - only God can do that.

Read: Ezekiel 36:25-27

According to this passage, God does three things to make us clean. First, God washes away the unclean thoughts, actions and attitudes of our past. Unclean doesn’t just mean naughty thoughts or actions, but any words, ideas, deeds or approach to living that can take the life out of us or

out of someone else. Second, God gives us a new way of thinking about the way we live - God's own way. And third, God puts his own Spirit inside us so that we can live God's way and get the most out of life.

Becoming "clean" requires us to be ready and willing to live for God and it requires God to wash away our sins and fill us with his Spirit so that we can do it. God is just waiting for us to ask.

Read: Psalm 51:1-3, 7, 10, 12, 16-17

This is exactly the kind of thing John the Baptist was teaching people. Look back at Mark 1: 4. John was "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Notice that it is not the baptism, not the dipping in water that leads to the forgiveness of sins; it is the change of heart and way of living that leads to the forgiveness of sins. John baptized people who had already made up their minds to change their ways. It was a statement that they had decided to live for God.

John didn't invent baptism. It was a very old ritual that was practiced by lots of people for hundreds of years before John whenever they wanted to symbolize cleansing on the inside by washing themselves on the outside in a religious ritual. Jewish religious leaders were required to go through a ritual bathing before they could enter the temple and offer sacrifices - their sins had to be "washed away" before they could set foot in such a holy place - but it was often done from a basin, by splashing water on themselves.

People who wanted to become Jews had to be baptized as a symbol of washing away the pollution of their past lives outside the faith so they could make a clean, new beginning in Judaism. Jews believed the Gentiles were extremely unclean and made sure their entire bodies were covered in the ritual water before they could be considered spiritually clean enough to enter God's Kingdom.

Most of the Jews believed they were already safe in the Kingdom of God simply because they were Jews. They thought it didn't matter what they thought or did or said - they were God's chosen people and that made them acceptable in God's sight. But that was exactly what John the Baptist was challenging. He preached to the Jews that belonging to the Kingdom of God has more to do with choosing to live with God as your king, following God's commandments and behaving God's way than it has to do with who your parents are. John helped the Jews understand that the sin in their lives made them unclean too and that "dirtiness" could keep them out of the Kingdom of God. They had to confess their sins and change their ways just like everybody else if they wanted to be God's people. And they needed to show other people that they had decided to live for God by being baptized.

The form of baptism that John used was a little bit different from what we practice in most modern Baptist churches. Historical records outside the Bible describe it this way: John would stand in the river and the people who came to be baptized would wade toward him until the water was up to their waist. Then John would put his hand on their head, ask God to bless them,

and then they would crouch down until they were completely covered by the water - they had to be fully immersed in the water to symbolize God making them completely clean. Then they would stand up again and walk back to the shore.

This was no private thing. There was a crowd on the river bank. People came from all over the country of Judea and from Jerusalem and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. It was an opportunity for people to take a public stand, "Look every one! I have decided to live for God! I have confessed my sin to God and changed my approach to life; God has cleansed my heart and now I am determined to follow God's ways."

Jesus also came to John to be baptized in the Jordan River. He was making a public declaration like everyone else. "I have decided to live for God; I have made up my mind to do the will of God no matter where it leads." Jesus had a choice too. He didn't have to do things God's way. The devil offered him several other ways to save the world (Luke 4:1-14). But Jesus made his choice to live for God. And this was the day he declared it to others.

God was pleased with Jesus for choosing to live God's way. God is pleased with us too when we take a public stand to live for God. Baptism was important to Jesus. He believed it was important to be baptized himself and he knew it was important for his followers to be baptized. Before Jesus returned to heaven after he had been crucified and was raised from the dead, he gave an order to his disciples that we call the Great Commission.

Read: Matthew 28:19

John baptized people with only God the Father in mind because Jesus was not yet known to be the Son of God and Saviour of the world but John knew there would soon be a time when baptism would become something more than he was doing. He says so in Mark 1:8. He knew there would come a time when people would be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Q: What do you think it means to be baptized with the Holy Spirit?

When you immerse a cup into a sink full of water, where does the water end up? Inside the cup as well as all around the cup. Being baptized with the Holy Spirit means being filled and surrounded by God's Spirit. Ezekiel 36 told us that we need God's Spirit to help us do what we have made up our minds to do - live for God. God gives us his spirit when our hearts are clean - that happens when God forgives our sin when we have decided to give up our ways and follow God's way.

Being baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a way of saying, "I have decided to live for God and that means following the example of his Son Jesus who shows us what God is like and what we can be and I count on the Holy Spirit to help me do it."

Baptism was important in the early Church too and the way baptism was done was changed a little to express even more things than John the Baptist had done. Instead of squatting down in the water, the person who was performing the Baptism would lay the person down flat on their back under the water and then bring them up again. This is sort of a re-enactment of the death,

burial and resurrection of Jesus, a way of expressing what his sacrifice has done for us. We can see this already in Paul's letter to the Romans.

Read: Romans 6:3-5

There is also the symbolism of dying to our old sinful self and being raised to a new and better life.

Read: Romans 6:6-8,10-11

This ritual called baptism is done once and only once. God understands that our Christian faith is a journey and we are bound to make mistakes and continually have to go to God to confess our sins and ask forgiveness; to put our old desires and ways of life to death. We don't have to be rebaptized each time we recommit ourselves to Christ. We do it once and we do it publicly to tell other people that we have decided to follow Jesus.

Another reason for being baptized in a public service is because we are becoming a part of a group of believers. Other Christians who watch us be baptized have a duty to help a new believer develop their faith, to walk with them on their Christian journey, and to be aware that this person is now committed to the body of Christ and will begin to take on some responsibilities in the life of the church.

Once we are baptized, it is important for us to show our determination to follow God's way and Jesus' example in the way we think and speak, in our attitude to life and the way we treat other people, in the way we make our money and how we spend it, and in every other aspect of our day to day living. That's part of having abundant life!

Church Membership

The Bible teaches us that each individual Christian has direct access to God through prayer and it speaks of Jesus as the great high priest and declares that we don't need a priest of any other kind to mediate between ourselves and God.

Read: Hebrews 4:14-16; 7:26-28 and I Timothy 2:5-6a

But that doesn't mean we are expected to follow Jesus all by ourselves. Ever since the beginning of Jesus' ministry on earth he encouraged believers to be together. After his death, resurrection and return to heaven, the group of Jesus' followers who met together on a regular basis for prayer and worship, education, mission and evangelism became known as the Church. As members were scattered all over the Roman Empire, Christians gathered together in smaller groups called churches.

Each church was made up of people who, by their own choice, believed in Jesus as their personal Saviour (the one who saves them from their sin and offers them eternal life) and were committed to serve him as Lord (the one who sets the standard by which we live) of their lives. The Book of Acts makes a strong link between belief and baptism followed very closely by membership in a church which included participation in worship, learning about the faith, interacting with other members of the community and doing the work of Christ - introducing people to what God is really like and inviting others to become part of God's family.

Read: Acts 2:37-42; 8:4-13; 16:11-15; 18:5-8

In his letters to particular churches, the apostle Paul compared the church to a body.

Read: I Corinthians 12:12-27

We are the hands and feet and eyes and ears and heart of Christ in the world today. It is our job to be on the lookout for people in need of physical, mental, spiritual, emotional and social care and reach out to them through the love of Jesus to offer meaningful support. Every individual member of a group of believers has an important part to play in mission and ministry. No one is extraneous or redundant. We cannot count on someone else to do our work for us and if we don't do our part, there will be holes in our effectiveness.

Q: Does this mean that we are to spend all our time and energy doing "church" activities? What did Jesus do?

We do have specially trained ministers whose job it is to help us understand scripture, guide our spiritual development, enable us to discover our gifts and employ them in service for God, to name a few of their tasks, but these "professionals" are not above anyone else in the church. Our ministers, pastors or clergy work side by side with other believers using their own gifts in mission and ministry. Every one of us represents Christ in the world. We are all expected to

introduce others to Jesus and to live as servants who call him Lord. We are all members of the body of Christ. Each of us has been given gifts to use for the good of all.

Read: Ephesians 3:20-21; 4:11-13 and I Peter 2:9-10

Q: How can you discover the gifts you have been given and determine where God is hoping you will use them?

Since it has been God's plan for us from the beginning of creation that we should enjoy life and find it satisfying and wonderful, then, discovering, developing and using the gifts God has given us should be a tremendously fulfilling experience. We can safely assume that the things we love to do, the things we are naturally good at, the things that make us feel alive are the gifts God has given us and using them in God's service ought to fill us with even more life. The Bible lists a number of gifts that can be used within the church.

Read: Romans 12:6-8; I Corinthians 12:28-31 and Ephesians 4:11

These gifts were meant to be used primarily within the church and all of them are important but they are not the only gifts God has given and they are no more important than any others. The work to which God calls us goes way beyond the walls of our places of worship. It is God's desire that all people have an opportunity to learn about Jesus and consider inviting him into their hearts and not everyone comes looking for that in our churches. Many people don't even know they need the Lord. Jesus worked among people who were not regular "religious" folk and so should we. If God has given you athletic gifts, then developing them will bring you into contact with other athletes who might never have heard about Jesus. Seeing how you live and hearing about the difference your relationship with Jesus makes in your life may have a profound effect on them. Musicians, actors, dancers and artists can reach others in the artistic arenas of life. Mechanics, engineers, machinists, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, welders, etc. can touch the lives of people in their fields. Emergency response workers, medical practitioners, social workers, and child caregivers can show their colleagues the difference Christian faith makes in their lives. The list goes on. God wants to reach other people with his love through you and God will provide opportunities for that to happen.

Q: What are you good at? What do you enjoy doing?

What new skills would you like to learn?

How can you imagine using your gifts in God's service?

How does being a member of a church affect using your gifts outside the church?

Communion

Believers who are determined to take their place within the Body of Christ and participate in service and worship with other Christians also share in something we now call “Communion.” This is the second ritual (or ordinance) that Jesus told his followers to practice on a regular basis. It all began about 3,500 years ago (about 1446 B.C.) when God was preparing to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt where they were slaves and lead them into the land that had been promised to them in the days of Abraham and Sarah.

Read: Exodus 12:1-13

This meal was to be celebrated each year from that day forward so they would never forget God’s ability to save the people who put their trust in God and fulfill the promises made to them. Eating the lamb provided nourishment for their journey. Painting the blood around their doors marked them as God’s people and that saved them from death.

Later, in the time of Isaiah, (about 700 B.C.) God promised to send someone the prophet compared to a “lamb”, who would be offered as a sacrifice for our sins so that we could be made whole.

Read: Isaiah 53:4-12

John the Baptist identified Jesus as that person when he pointed to him and said, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) And during the Last Supper, which was a celebration of “the Passover”, Jesus made a connection between the bread and his own body, the wine and his own blood and invited his followers to eat and drink them explaining that his own body and blood would soon be sacrificed for all people.

Each of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) tells the story in a similar way.

Read: Matthew 26:26-29 or Mark 14:22-25 or Luke 22:14-20

Jesus had already explained that it was only through his sacrifice that people could ever have eternal life - full and abundant life now and forever.

Read: John 6:28-40, 48-50, 53-57

When we share communion, we celebrate the far past: the first Passover when God saved a group of people who were identified by the blood of a lamb; the nearer past: the Last Supper when God was about to save all people who believe their sins are covered by the blood of the Lamb; the present: where we celebrate Christ living within us and signify that by eating the bread and drinking the wine that are symbols of his body and blood; and the future: when we are promised a feast with Jesus in heaven.

Read: Romans 3:21-26 and 5:6-10

Q: According to these passages: Who can have their sins forgiven?

How is Jesus' blood like the blood of the lamb in Moses' time?

How does the sacrifice of Jesus show us God's love?

Just like with Baptism, it is not the ritual that saves us or makes any difference in our lives but the state of our heart, our relationship with God and our commitment to live following Jesus' example.

Read: I Corinthians 11:23-29

Q: Should we take communion and Jesus' sacrifice seriously? Consider the following passages as you form your answer:

Read: I Corinthians 10:16-17; I Peter 1:18-21 and I John 1:6-9

Baptist Church History

The Baptist denomination of Christianity arose during the Protestant Revolution (1500-1650 A.D.) after the invention of the printing press and the translation of scripture into common languages allowed people to read the Bible for themselves.

As people began to study the Word of God, they noticed inconsistencies between what the Bible said and some of the doctrines and practices the Roman Catholic Church - the state church -held. Some groups of church leaders and lay people “protested” particular points of Roman Catholicism so strongly that, when the Church refused to change their way, these people broke their ties with the official Church and began their own congregations based on their own understanding of scripture. These were called “Protestant Churches” and were led by such people as Martin Luther (Lutherans), Huldreich Zwingli (Reformed), Conrad Grebel (Swiss Brethren), Menno Simons (Mennonite) and many more. In the midst of all this turmoil, it is difficult to sort out exactly what influenced the development of the Baptist denomination. Jerry Zeman, in his book entitled Baptist Roots and Identity (Toronto: Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec, 1978) writes,

The Baptist movement ...can be pictured as a river. Like all large rivers, it drew its initial strength from several springs and streams, and was later enlarged by numerous tributaries in its flow through the centuries. Continental Anabaptism; English Puritan Separatism; the Great Awakening in the American colonies; the democratic ideals of the young American Republic, the later evangelical revivals; the modern missionary thrust; the spirit of pioneer societies; the sectarian dissent in the Soviet Union; these and other spiritual and cultural influences have contributed to the formation of the Baptist tradition as we know it in its manifold expressions around the world today. (p.1-2)

Harry Renfree traces the strongest stream of influence in, Heritage and Horizon: The Baptist Story In Canada. (Mississauga: Canadian Baptist Federation, 1988) The following information comes mostly from that book:

The Reformation was at full steam on the continent of Europe when Henry VIII was King of England. Henry was fed up with the Pope who would not allow him to divorce his wife so he directed Parliament to make him head of their new state church: the Church of England. He made a few doctrinal adjustments, one of which allowed him to divorce, but no real reforms. This frustrated people both within and outside this state church. Henry died in 1547 and his young son, Edward VI, ascended the throne. He began to make more significant changes but, unfortunately, he died just six years later. His sister Mary then became Queen. She reinstated the Roman Catholic Church in England and persecuted many hundreds of religious leaders so cruelly (she did earn the name “Bloody Mary”) that they fled to the European Continent.

Fortunately, from the reformers' point of view, Mary's reign was also brief and when her sister Elizabeth took the throne in 1558, the Protestant cause was allowed to develop again. Many of the religious leaders who had fled now returned to England and brought with them what they learned from the reformers in Europe. They hoped to "purify" the Church of England from within and so formed the Puritan Party. When the Queen and other officials of the state church refused to implement their suggestions, many of the Puritans realized they could not accomplish their goal internally. If they wanted a church built on New Testament principles as they understood them, they were going to have to separate from the Church of England and start over. And so these Puritans became known as Separatists and they were persecuted. Elizabeth died in 1605 and James became King. The religious calamity that had been simmering the entire previous century was really boiling now and King James wanted to bring some order out of this chaos so he called together a number of religious leaders with the hope that they could come up with some practical ways of addressing the situation. The most useful suggestion that came out of that conference was to prepare a translation of the Bible, in common but proper English, that could be used by all Christians in the kingdom. James agreed but stipulated that the work must be done by the finest biblical scholars in the land. And so began the careful preparation of the King James Version of the Bible. It was released in 1611 and within 40 years, this translation had replaced all other English versions. (The Holy Bible: Authorized (King James) Version, Nashville, Memorial Bibles International Inc., 1974 was the source of the information in this paragraph.) Meanwhile, James continued the persecution of people who would not conform to the state church and by 1608, life had become so difficult for the Separatists that many of them fled the country. John Smyth (pronounced Smith) was one of the religious leaders who made the journey from Church of England to Puritan Party to Separatist. He was minister of a little Separatist church in Gainsborough when the persecution became more than his congregation could bear. With the help of another Separatist, Thomas Helwys (pronounced hell-wheeze), John Smyth moved his congregation to Amsterdam. It was during their first year in Holland that John Smyth, after many discussions with other expatriate Separatists, came to the conclusion that infants are not to be baptized. Since he was trying to establish a New Testament church, baptism of believers by immersion was the only way he could accept. He baptized himself, Thomas Helwys and other members of his congregation and so this group of believers is considered to be the very First Baptist Church, established in 1609 in Amsterdam, Holland.

In 1612, Thomas Helwys and some members of the Amsterdam congregation decided to return to England, taking with them their understanding of what a New Testament church ought to be. So now there were Baptists in England as well as Holland. These early Baptists adopted many of the views of the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius, who emphasized three main points: that we are free to choose whether or not we will live for God; that Christ died for all people, not just "the elect" as John Calvin asserted; and that it is possible to fall from grace. Expanding upon ideas he had learned from John Smyth, Thomas Helwys began the call for religious liberty in England. He wrote the following words in "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity,"

*Our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he hath no authority as a king but in earthly causes, and if the king's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more: for men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the king shall not answer for it, neither may the king judge between God and man. (A.C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: 1947) p.47)*

The logical next step in this line of thinking about religious liberty was the separation of church and state. This challenge was too bold and Thomas Helwys was thrown into prison where he died. King James was feeling threatened by this new religious movement and he encouraged people who wanted to be free of the Church of England to go to the New World. Since the alternative was to conform to the state religion, many Puritans, Separatists and Baptists set sail for North America in 1620. Remember the Mayflower? And so the story goes on.

Baptists eventually came to Canada from the United States, Europe, England, wherever there were Baptists interested in this new land and they, of course, brought their own variations on the denomination as it had developed in their congregations. This unfortunately led to controversy and division. Jerry Zeman describes it this way:

The early churches in Southern Ontario were the fruit of missionary labour by American ministers of the Regular Baptist persuasion, with a strong emphasis on closed communion. In the Ottawa-Montreal region, the Scottish Baptist immigrants imported a heritage of revivals ... while newcomers from England brought with them English Baptist traditions. At Grande Ligne, French Baptist work was established by Madame Henrietta Feller, an immigrant from Switzerland. Most Baptists of British origin as well as the French-speaking Baptists practiced open communion. The protracted communion controversy was thus an unfortunate combination of theological and ethnic differences, and was further aggravated by the rivalry between the Ottawa-Montreal region in the East, and the area dominated by Toronto in the West. The issue disrupted closer denominational cooperation for most of the nineteenth century. In the 1920's, the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, led by T.T. Shields (1873-1955), resulted in a major division. About one-seventh of the churches left the

*Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec...most of them now belong to the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada, organized in 1953. (Zeman, *Baptist Roots and Identity* (Toronto: Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec, 1978 p.33)*

In spite of the differences among individuals and whole congregations on particular points of faith and practice, Baptist Christians in Canada continue to hold onto a distinctive combination of beliefs that help identify us as Baptists but, as Ronald F. Watts explains in the pamphlet he prepared in 1982 entitled Baptist 'Distinctives':

What we share with other Christian denominations is more important than our disagreements! Our distinctiveness does not lie in our holding to some doctrines which other Christians do not hold, but rather in our attitude towards these basic doctrines, and in the fact that we emphasize a particular combination of beliefs...

Baptist Distinctives

There are nine items in the collection of beliefs that, together, identify us as Baptist. Christians of other denominations affirm many of these statements but add or take away items from this list in their own particular combination of beliefs. We call these Baptist Distinctives because they describe the basics of our understanding of Christianity.

1. Lordship of Christ

Read: Colossians 1:15-20 and Philippians 2:5-11

Have you noticed the presence of the fish in the symbol of the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec?

During the first century A.D. when Christianity was new and the Roman Government was trying to stop it from spreading, believers used the sign of a fish to identify themselves to one another. One of the reasons certain Roman Emperors were so intent on stopping this new faith was that the Christians refused to say “Caesar is Lord.” They would only say, “Jesus is Lord.” It was Jesus’ way of life these people had chosen to follow, not Caesar’s. It was Jesus’ rules they were going to live by, not Caesar’s. It was Jesus they trusted to care for them, not Caesar. The fish was chosen because in Greek, each letter of the word for fish (pronounced *ick-thoos*) stood for a word in the phrase: *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour* which clearly identified the Lord they claimed.

We believe Jesus is our Lord too - the one who has charge over our lives, the one who sets the standard for our behaviour, the one who saves us from our sins, the one who sustains and enriches our lives - and we want to make our stand so clear that we have expressed it right in our organizational symbol.

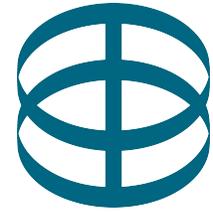
That same phrase “Jesus is Lord” was also written on our national symbol when we were called the Baptist Federation of Canada (now Canadian Baptist Ministries).

2. Authority of Scripture in matters of faith and practice

Read: II Timothy 3:16-17

We call the Bible the “Word of God” because we believe it tells us the things God wants us to know about what God is like and how we are to behave toward God, ourselves, other people and the rest of creation if we are to enjoy life in all its fullness. All Christians need to read the Bible for themselves because it is the standard by which live. We must approach the Bible with open and active minds, using the resources God gave us, but at the same time looking to the Holy Spirit for guidance as we seek to understand God's will for our own lives, for the Church and for the world.

Take another look at the logo of the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec. Do you see the open book? The Bible is central to our understanding of who we are; so important that we have included it in our organizational symbol too.



3. Priesthood of all believers

Read: I Peter 2:9-12; I John 4:1 and Acts 13:1-3

We believe that each individual Christian has direct access to God through prayer. The Bible tells us that Jesus is our great high priest and we don't need a priest of any other kind to mediate between ourselves and God. That privilege also comes with the responsibility of taking an active role in mission and ministry. Every one of us represents Christ in the world. We are all expected to introduce others to Jesus and to live as servants who call him Lord.

On top of this, the Bible tells us that all believers are responsible to ensure that it is God's lead we are following when we make plans together for mission and ministry, education and outreach. Each individual Christian is to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God". Consulting scripture and employing prayer, we need to discern whether the actions and attitudes under consideration are what God wants us to pursue. Being a believer, and thereby a "priest", is a serious job.

4. Believers' Church

Read: Acts 2:37-42

We believe that the church is made up of people who, by their own choice, believe in Jesus as their personal Saviour and are committed to serving him as Lord of their lives. We encourage new believers to make a public profession of their faith through baptism in front of other Christians and to take on the privileges and responsibilities of membership in their local congregation. The Book of Acts links belief and baptism very closely which is then followed by participation in worship, learning about the faith, interacting with other members of the community and doing the work of Christ.

5. Two ordinances: believers' baptism by immersion and the Lord's supper

Read: Matthew 28:19-20 and I Corinthians 11:23-26

Ordinances are symbolic rituals we are "ordered" to observe. Jesus told his followers to perform two ceremonies - baptizing disciples and celebrating the Lord's supper. These have been discussed in detail earlier in this study.

6. Soul liberty and freedom of conscience.

Read: Jeremiah 17:10; Romans 14:10-13 and Revelation 20:12-13

Part of being made in the image of God is having the freedom to make choices about our faith and our behaviour. God is the only one who has the right to define what is proper when it

comes to our faith, our worship and the daily conduct of our lives; no human being has the right to dictate these things to us. Ronald F. Watts puts it this way,

We believe in individual freedom of conscience in matters of faith and conduct:

- *Freedom to worship or not and freedom in the form of worship,*
- *Freedom to apply the Christian faith in daily living,*
- *Freedom to interpret the Scriptures according to one's own understanding of the leading of the Holy Spirit.*

These freedoms put a great deal of responsibility on individual believers. We take this stand with the understanding that each person is accountable to God for our own actions and attitudes in life; we need to make our choices informed ones. It also requires us to stand up for others when it comes to their right to choose their faith and behaviour under the same proviso.

Our position on soul liberty and freedom of conscience demands that we help to make it possible for people to hold and practice any religion they think is right (as long as this does not interfere with the freedom of others) and to teach their religion to others while we offer ours to them as an alternative we believe is worth considering.

7. Autonomous and interdependent local churches who together constitute the body of Christ as part of the church universal

Since we believe the church is composed of believers, we also believe that each local church has everything it needs to determine the will of God for us in our community setting. Together, church members ask God to guide us as we investigate the needs that surround us and to lead us into mission and ministry in our own neighbourhood. Decisions are made by the members of each local church in a democratic manner normally following Robert's Rules of Order for Parliamentary Procedure (General Robert was a Baptist himself!). At the same time, we realize that there are some needs in our communities and beyond them in our province, our country, our continent and our world that are too demanding for us to meet on our own and so we look for like-minded groups of believers to work with us, sharing our monetary and human resources to accomplish particular missions and ministries together.

Just as autonomous individual believers are interdependent as part of the body of Christ, so autonomous local churches can work interdependently as part of the body of Christ. Sometimes we work with churches from other denominations in our neighbourhoods and sometimes we work with other Baptist churches. We recognize that all Christians are part of the church universal; part of the Body of Christ. Think of the human body where distinct components come together to form cells that accomplish particular tasks and then different kinds of cells work together to form organs that perform specific functions and then various organs work together so that an entire body can live and move and make a difference in the lives of others. And then several individuals can come together to do things in concert with one another that we cannot do by ourselves. At no time does a larger arrangement of components determine the form or activity of its parts. In the same way, we believe that individual congregations work together in

larger groups but at no time do local churches lose their autonomy. However, we must take our responsibilities seriously. When we agree to take part in mission and ministry together, we are agreeing to be accountable to one another and promising to do our part to the best of our ability. Early in our history, some Baptist churches in Ontario and in Quebec decided to work interdependently with each other in small groups known as Associations. Each Association determines for itself the projects its member churches will embark upon together. These commonly include such things as inducting and ordaining ministers, providing programs and resources for groups of men, women and young people, supporting local, national and foreign ministries and many more concerns.

There are presently seventeen Associations. Sixteen of them are organized along geographical lines and one, Amherstburg, was formed because of cultural similarities.

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| 1. Amherstburg | 10. Northwestern |
| 2. Canada Central | 11. Ottawa |
| 3. Elgin | 12. Owen Sound |
| 4. Georgian Bay | 13. Oxford Brant |
| 5. Guelph | 14. Quebec |
| 6. Middlesex-Lambton | 15. Toronto |
| 7. Niagara-Hamilton | 16. Trent Valley |
| 8. Norfolk | 17. Western |
| 9. Northern | |

A little over 113 years ago, these English speaking churches in Ontario and Quebec formed another organization designed to enable us to do even bigger projects together by combining our resources. The Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec was officially formed in 1888. Each local church maintains its autonomy and participates in the Convention by appointing delegates to each annual meeting where decisions are made regarding particular missions and ministries we enter together and how we spend our pooled resources. With an annual operating fund presently greater than 3 million dollars, we are able to do remarkable things together.

8. The local church as a community of persons who covenant together how they will walk in obedience to Christ

Each local Baptist church is free to determine how it will govern itself. Many develop their own constitution, normally following Robert's Rules of Order for Parliamentary Procedure. Some churches do not have a formal document but it is highly recommended that all congregations develop a procedure of some sort for self-government so that everyone understands how their church makes decisions and determines the missions and ministries they will pursue together. Some congregations form a covenant.

A covenant is an agreement between two parties in which each has some responsibilities to fulfill in the bargain. God has been making covenants with people throughout our history. Making covenants with one another in a Christian community is a way of taking our privileges and responsibilities as followers of Jesus seriously. When people become members of our church, there is often a moment in the service where that new member and the rest of the congregation promise to be accountable to one another for our Christian walk individually and as a community of believers. We may promise to encourage each other to discover and exercise our God-given gifts. We may promise to work together to make a positive difference in our community. We may promise to urge one another to deepen and strengthen our relationship with God. Whatever we decide to promise each other is a covenant.

9. Independence of church and state

Read: Luke 20:19-26; James 2:8 and Micah 6:8

Ever since the time of Thomas Helwys, we have believed that the church and secular government should not try to exercise control over one another. They are two different things and have different reasons for being. In telling the chief priests who confronted him to give to Caesar what belonged to Caesar and to God what belonged to God, Jesus made it clear that the state and church have different jobs to do and we should pay proper attention to both. Our belief in soul liberty and freedom of conscience means that we cannot dictate to our society how things should be run nor would we accept secular advice on how we practice our faith. At the same time, we are called to make a positive difference in our world and, using proper democratic channels, we can be an influence for righteousness in our governments at all levels and in our world.

Sometimes loving our neighbour as ourselves involves making changes in the way our society takes care of people in need of physical, psychological and social care. Sometimes doing justice requires us to encourage our law makers to reconsider how we respond to criminals and victims of crime, how we settle civil disputes and ensure safe and fair labour practices. Finding a balance is important because we believe the church does not have the right to make society's decisions for them any more than we want our government to interfere in religious affairs. These are the beliefs that, together, identify us as Baptist. Becoming a member of a Baptist church implies accepting these things too.

Q: Are you ready to express your faith in Jesus as your personal Saviour and Lord through Baptism? Are you ready to take your place as a member in your local Baptist Church?

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