

# BAPTIST HISTORY & IDENTITY

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An Elective Course for Local Churches

Teaching Baptist Identity

Leaders Guide



# Table of Contents

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Introduction .....	5
Follow the Leader .....	6
1. JESUS IS LORD .....	7
2. The Word of God is the Authoritative Rule of Faith & Practice .....	9
A Church With 100 Ministers? .....	13
3. The Priesthood of All believers.....	13
4. Mission & Evangelism.....	17
Freedom in the Common Life .....	20
5. A Believers' Church– Part A Two Ordinances.....	21
5. A Believers' Church Part B Believers' Baptism By Immersion .....	23
6. Church Autonomy & Association .....	28
Let Freedom Reign!.....	34
7. Freedom & Equality: Part A – Soul Liberty .....	34
8. Freedom & Equality: Part b – Separation of Church & State .....	38
FURTHER LEARNING .....	42



# Introduction

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Have you ever wondered, “why Baptist?” Why do we have to use all these committees – can’t the pastor just make a decision and tell us what it is? Why doesn’t the denomination just tell the churches what to teach about women in ministry and discipline those churches that disagree? Why can’t she become a member just because she was baptized as an infant and not as an adult?

The following materials are designed to be used to teach Baptist distinctives to new, or interested, Baptists in a church setting. This study keeps the local congregation in mind while making various decisions about its layout. For example, recognizing that many people have limited time available to them to take such an elective, the actual teaching sessions are limited to four. Theoretically, this would allow for a four-week commitment on the part of the participants, who would learn about two distinctives each week. Although there are many different ways to categorize Baptist distinctives, these follow the ones summarized by the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec: Jesus is Lord, The Word of God is the Authoritative Rule of Faith & Practice, The Priesthood of All Believers, A Believers’ Church, Mission & Evangelism, Church Autonomy & Association, and Freedom & Equality (in two parts: “Soul Liberty” and “Separation of Church & State”).

Each session is designed to be interactive, practical, and (hopefully!) interesting, and to last approximately two hours, with a longer time for questions and discussion at the end. In each section, a time allotment is listed as a guideline; leaders who follow these guidelines will find the week easily fits well into a two-hour time frame. In theory, someone interested in leading or taking this elective could do so in a condensed form through a one or two-day workshop. I suggest a weekly format, however, so that individuals have the time between each session to study and consider the Scripture passages and optional readings connected to each week’s session. The lessons are also structured to best suit a small group format, with 4-12 students.

Each week follows a similar format. The session begins with an introduction, and then discusses two distinctives. Each distinctive study begins with a scenario to get people thinking about the issue, and then turns to Scripture to explain the Baptist teaching. The particular Baptist view on the issue is discussed after the Scripture and is followed by a time of discussion. For most distinctives, there is a snapshot of a famous person or moment in Baptist history that connects to the distinctive being discussed. Using this snapshot is optional, although it might help people further connect to the Baptist heritage. In this layout, the bolded font are comments that leaders are to read aloud, although leaders are encouraged to change and adapt the wording based on your context or the people in the group. Not all questions or historical narrative are bolded, although leaders can read these verbatim if they prefer. Further, in each case the questions are meant to spark discussion.

As is the case for all denominations, there are undoubtedly many elements of Baptist heritage that can make church members frustrated at times. Baptists can be thankful of their denominational distinctives. When people understand the “whys” behind the “hows” of Baptists life, they will not only understand Baptist polity, but will also feel proud to support it. As Baptists, we hold these distinctives because we believe they are worth holding. Teaching them to new generations of Baptists helps ensure that these valuable distinctives will continue to be honoured in our congregations as we seek to live out God’s mission in our neighbourhoods and communities.

# Follow the Leader

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## Session One

### Distinctives

1. **Jesus is Lord**
2. **The Word of God is the Authoritative Rule of Faith & Practice**

### Materials needed

- a chalk board, whiteboard, or large writing easel, markers, Bibles, the movie “Luther” (optional)

### Introduction (*15 minutes*)

Since this is the first meeting of participants, it will be necessary in this session to do some introduction about what participants can expect. begin by asking each member of the group to share:

His or her name and how long he or she has attended a Baptist church

One question that he or she has had about your church’s live or policies. Give them an example, such as “Why does our church have so many committees?” (they may or may not share a question that connects to a Baptist distinctive specifically but that is fine for this exercise)

Write each question that participants ask on the board, without attempting to answer them at this time. After everyone has shared say something like:

Thank you for sharing. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and the reason I am here today is to help teach you a little more about Baptist life. Over the next four weeks, we will meet together in this way to discuss elements of Baptist values – we will call these “distinctives.” Many of these distinctives are held by other churches as well, but we hope in this setting to show you how they all work together to form, specifically, our Baptist heritage. Each week we will discuss two of these distinctives (I have summarized them in eight areas), looking at the Scriptural basis behind a value, the Baptist view of the same particular issue, and the history of how the distinctive developed. We will do so in an interactive way, and I encourage you to ask questions as we go along and share your own stories about Baptist live. At the end of each week, we will discuss what advantages and disadvantages you perceive exist with the distinctive discussed and how it connects to our church’s life.

My hope is that at the end of this time together you will find the answer to many of these questions you have shared here and will also understand and appreciate more about what it means to be a Baptist. Again, the purpose of this study is not to put down other traditions or denominations. Instead, we want to explore the unique role that we as Baptists have to fill in the Christian world. Each week we will spend about two hours together. (note: be sure to keep a copy of the questions asked in this session, as you will return to them in the last meeting.)

Allow a few minutes for people to ask any other questions that might have about logistics of the elective.

Open in prayer.

# 1. Jesus is Lord

## Scenario (5 minutes)

**Say:** One day you are chatting in your small group about all the changes in our secular society. All of you agree that you find it frustrating to see the lack of morals in society at large and wish that you had a larger voice as Christians to influence laws and decision making. As you are chatting, one man says passionately: “Sometimes I think that it would be better if things were like they were in the Middle Ages, when the government looked after the church and kept society in line.” One woman responds jokingly “Well Baptists sure don’t believe that!” Everyone laughs, but the man is confused and asks: “Why don’t we?”

**Ask** the group to respond to the scenario by asking questions like:

- What do you think happened in this scenario? Would you have had the same question as the man?

**Say:** The issue being discussed here is best summarized as Jesus is Lord or “The Lordship of Christ.” Let’s begin by considering what the Scripture has to say about this issue.

## Scripture: What does the Bible Say? (15 minutes)

Many Bible passages talk about Jesus is Lord. Ask for volunteers to read the following texts:

- Matthew 3:3
- Acts 2:29-36
- Philippians 2:9-11
- 1 Peter 3:15

**Ask** questions like:

- What do these passages say about who Jesus is? (He is Lord)
- What does the term Lord mean?
- What does it mean for us to see Jesus as Lord?
- What do you think it means for the Church to see Jesus as Lord?

## What do Baptists Believe? (10 minutes)

You may read this section verbatim, although you may stop and ask questions and get feedback and thoughts from participants as you go along. Feel free to elaborate certain areas if it will help your group understand this idea better – if you need more information about this distinctive, please consult the list of sources at the end of this project.

Baptists believe in what they call the Lordship of Christ. Of course, seeing Jesus Christ as Lord probably seems like a logical belief for any church to hold, and indeed most Christian churches do. However, to Baptists, this distinctive does not just mean that we see Jesus as Lord of our lives. It also

refers specifically to the idea that Christ is the ultimate governor of the church and that there is no other authority over the church besides Him.

This idea may seem obvious to us today, but to understand the importance of this concept, we have to consider the situation out of which Baptists were founded. Most agree that the Baptists began in England in the early 1600s – a time when there was a great deal of religious upheaval in society at large. The English Church had separated itself from Catholic rule during the Reformation and made the Monarch the head of the Church of England. Unlike today, at this time there was no separation of church and state. This meant that the government could tell the church how to function and what to do and that government leaders were officially in charge of the church and could influence church policy and leadership. One of the Kings during this season is known to have said of those who did not confirm to the Church of England: “I will make them conform, or I will harry them out of the land.”

While many groups rebelled against such ideas, early Baptists, in particular, began to challenge the idea that the state could run the church (we will discuss this idea on another day when we discuss the separation of the state and the church). They declared that there could be no early governor over the church, and that Christ was the only governor. They then went so far as to say that this also applied to church government – in their view, Christ was the only head of the church. These ideas were meant to contrast the views of churches like the Roman Catholic church (whose head was the Pope) and the Church of England (whose head was the Monarch). This continues to be an important distinctive in Baptist polity, although many other churches would now also agree with these teachings.

After you have finished explaining the Baptist view of this distinctive, summarize what was stated in one or two short sentences, and then ask if anyone has any clarifying questions about it.

**Ask:**

- Why do you think it was so important for Baptists to declare the Lord as the one true “governor” of the Church?
- What do you think this meant for how they saw church life?
- What is your initial reaction to this idea?
- Do you agree or disagree with this distinctive? Why?

### A Story from History (Optional) (5 minutes)

If you choose to share this story, you may read it verbatim, or elaborate on certain points or ideas if you prefer.

Baptist history is actually difficult to define as having one clear starting point, but many argue that the first true “Baptist” was John Smyth. Smyth attended Cambridge University. During his studies there, he became dissuaded with the Church of England, and became a Separatist (one who separated from that church). He pastored a small Separatist church for a while until James I became King and began persecuting the Separatists so much that Smyth eventually found it intolerable and fled to Holland with his friend, Thomas Helwys. While they were there they formed what they called a second English church, one that was not, however under the crown’s authority. As he sought to form a church based on New Testament models, he became convinced that



**John Smyth**

one should be baptized as a believer and baptized himself. Furthermore, when looking at the New Testament he came to believe that apostolic succession (that means by which the Pope was granted power) was not about outward ordinances or visible organization, but of true faith. He founded a church in Holland on these principles, saying that a church must be made of believers, and not just of people who lived in the country and were required to be a certain religion by government.

Smyth died in 1612 but his friend Thomas Helwys and others returned to London after the persecution there had lightened and continued his teachings. This laid some of the foundations for the growth of what became the Baptist church. Despite continued persecution, they continued to teach that Jesus was the only Lord of the Church, and the only authority that they would follow.

**Say:** Smyth believed in a church that was disconnected from government power. Do you agree with this model? What does that mean for the church in the early 21st century?

### Discussion (10 minutes)

Break the group into groups of two or three. Ask half the groups to discuss the advantages of the distinctive of the Lordship of Christ, and the other half of the groups to discuss the disadvantages. After they have had time to discuss, get them to share their thoughts with the larger group.

Continue discussing by asking:

- Why do you think this view is important for Baptists?
- What do you think this view means for our church?

### Conclusion (5 minutes)

**Say:** Consider the scenario we read about being in your small group at the beginning of this discussion. After learning more about this distinctive, how might you respond to the man who asked, “Why don’t we?”

Allow time for a 10-minute stretch break (depending on time) before moving to the second half of the lesson.

## 2. The Word of God is the Authoritative Rule of Faith & Practice

### Scenario (5 minutes)

You are watching a T.V. program one day which features two people discussing how a church should figure out what to do in particular circumstances. One person argues that there are many sources of authority in the church, including its past traditions. She argues that if a church decided to do or believe something a certain way in the past, then the church must continue to follow that tradition. The other person disagrees. He says that the only source of authority is the Bible, and that we must continue to go back to it to understand its truth in order to make decisions. She says that such a view is ridiculous, since it allows individuals with little training or instruction in theology or biblical studies to interpret the Bible. Her opponent feels fine with that idea, saying that everyone has the ability to interpret the Bible. He continues to maintain that the Bible is all we need for church life.

- Who do you agree with in this scenario?
- Where did each person find “authority” in this scenario?

- How do you think churches must make decisions?

**Say:** One of the main foundations of Baptist polity is the Authority of Scripture. This distinctive maintains that the Bible must be placed over church tradition as the source of authority in church life and practice.

## Scripture: What does the Bible Say? (10 minutes)

Scripture itself testifies to its own authority. Ask for volunteers to read some of the following passages.

- 2 Timothy 3:14-17
- 2 Corinthians 4:2-4
- 2 Timothy 2:15
- Revelation 22:18-19
- 

Allow people to respond to the scenario by asking questions such as:

- What do these texts tell us about Scripture and its role?
- What does it mean if we say that the Bible is the “inspired word of God?”
- What does this tell us about how we should see Scripture?
- The Revelation text talked about no one adding or taking away from the Word: What does this tell us about the role of church tradition?

## What do Baptists believe? (10 minutes)

You may read this section verbatim, although you may stop and ask questions and get feedback and thoughts from participants as you go along. Feel free to elaborate certain areas if it will help your group understand this idea better – if you need more information about this distinctive, please consult the list of sources at the end of this project.

One of the most fundamental Baptists beliefs is The Word of God is the Authoritative Rule of Faith & Practice. This refers to several ideas. As you present each idea, give people a chance to respond to it.

### 1. **The Bible is the only authority**

This view again stems from much of what was happening at the time that the Baptist church was formed. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, tradition held an equally important place to Scripture. This means that creeds and degrees of church councils were as binding and authoritative as Scripture. Baptists disagree with this idea. For this reason, Baptists historically have used “Confessions of Faith” which discuss what everyone says they believe, as opposed to “Creeds” which say what one must believe.

### 2. **The Bible is the inspired Word of God.**

Straton defines inspiration as “revelation given through human personality.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Baptists believe that all parts of the Bible are equally inspired, meaning there was a specific purpose and need for each apparently unimportant paragraph.

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<sup>1</sup> Straton, Hilary H. "Democracy, Our Church Ideal". Baptists: Their Mission And Message. Hilary H. Straton. Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1941. Chapter 5. Print.

The Bible (particularly the New Testament) is the sole rule for faith and practice.

Baptists turn to the Bible as the rule for their doctrine and their ordinances. “What we find there we believe and endeavor to carry out. What we do not find there we reject.” This was the foundation for other areas of Baptist polity, such as believer’s baptism and congregational government.

All believers have the ability to read and interpret the Bible

Baptists believe that the Bible can be authoritative because it is open to all believers to read and understand by God’s Spirit. This does not mean we cannot learn from tradition or history.

The authority of Scripture is obviously also a fundamental belief in many other church traditions so that it can also seem like an obvious idea today. In the time the Baptist church was founded, however, the idea of turning to Scripture alone, and allowing individual believers to do so, in order to understand faith was profound (although many Reformers were also calling for such a shift in practice). Like some of these Reformers before them, Baptists challenged the idea that church councils or past decrees or creeds should have any authority over the church at all. This was very provoking of some other views at the time.

After discussing this view, **Ask questions such as:**

- What do you believe about the authority of the Bible?
- Which of these ideas rings most true to you?
- Are there any points here that you do not understand or with which you do not agree?

### A Story from History (Optional) (5 minutes)

For this Story from history, you may choose to use a video clip to highlight the changes occurring at this time. The movie “Luther” has several great scenes to illustrate this point, as the main character (Reformer Martin Luther) describes his views about the centrality of Scripture. One such scene occurs nearer the end of the movie, as we see Luther, in hiding, attempting to translate the Bible into German. Later, he gives the translated Bible to his prince, who responds in awe as he realizes he will now be able to read the Bible for himself. This is a powerful scene.



Martin Luther

If you choose to play such a clip, introduce it by explaining that although Luther was not a Baptist, his viewpoints represent a movement during the Reformation era that well illustrate the developing beliefs in many church traditions.

When you have finished playing the clip, **Ask:**

- What made Luther’s ideas so “revolutionary”?
- Why do you think early Baptists also held this view?
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### Discussion

Break the group into the groups they were in last time. Ask them again to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the principle of The Word of God is the Authoritative Rule of Faith & Practice (switch the groups to do advantages or disadvantages this time). After a few minutes of discussion, give them time to share with the group.

Continue discussing by asking:

- Why do you think this view is important for Baptists?
- What do you think this view means for our church?
- How do you see it acted out, or not acted out, in our church?
- 

## Conclusion (5 minutes)

Return to the scenario discussed at the beginning and ask people to respond to it from a Baptist perspective based on what they have learned about their view of The Word of God is the Authoritative Rule of Faith & Practice.

## Closing (5 minutes)

To close the evening, go around the group to ask each person to share something they learned this week that helped them understand their church better – encourage them to use concrete examples as much as possible (for example, “I understand why we have such Bible-based sermons now, because we have a strong emphasis on Scripture in our heritage”).

Encourage people throughout the week to review the Scripture passages discussed tonight, meditating on what they believe they mean for their church. For further reading, you might also provide a chapter or reading on the beginnings of Baptist history for people to read. You may prefer to use other readings that you have more readily available. If your own church has an official statement describing Baptist distinctives or your church’s beliefs, you may also find this helpful to share with participants.

Close the evening in prayer.

## Further Study

*Luther*. Dir. Eric Till. Universal, 2004. Film.

Vedder, Henry C. *A Short History of the Baptists*. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1891. Print.

Smyth, John. "Introduction to the Character of the Beast". *A Baptist Treasury*. Ed. Snyder L. Stealy. New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, 1958. 2-9. Print.

# A Church With 100 Ministers?

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## Session Two

### Distinctives

3. The Priesthood of All Believers
4. Mission & Evangelism

### Materials needed:

- Bibles, markers, large wipe board or big paper

### Introduction (10 minutes)

Begin by welcoming everyone to the group, including any first-time participants (although by this point, the leader should attempt to discourage newcomers to wait until the elective is offered again before coming, so they can take it from the beginning). Ask anyone if they have any question or thoughts after last week or coming out of the scripture texts or readings they reviewed this week.

Share a Bible passage together, based on one of last week's distinctives.

Open in prayer.

## 3. The Priesthood of All Believers

### Scenario (5 minutes)

**Say:** This scenario comes from a real event in history. It was a bitter January in the year 1077. The head of the Holy Roman Empire, Henry IV, stood in the snow before the castle of Canossa, in northern Italy, pleading for an audience with Pope Gregory VII. Henry found himself completely helpless before the Pope's dominating personality, as he had threatened an edict that would have deprived the people of Henry's realm of all ministries of the church. To the people of his day, this meant there would be no marriage, no baptism, no communion, no intercessors to talk to God. The people would be left without any way to connect to God or experience their faith. Despite the emperor's great power, he could not stand up against such a threat on the part of the Pope and came to plead his cause.



Henry IV

**Ask:**

- Why was the King so alarmed at the Pope's threat? (because the priests were the only way people could connect to God, and if the church withdrew they would be left without religion).
- How do you think it would have felt to have understood religion in this way?
- 

**Say:** While this scenario may seem far-fetched to us today it reflects an attitude that was common at the time. It was against such teaching that many believers eventually came to rebel, believing that all people could have direct access to God. Baptists joined in this claim. This led to the formation of a belief and distinctive called the "Priesthood of All believers."

### Scripture: What does the Bible Say? (10 minutes)

**Say:** Baptists argue that in the New Testament God granted everyone access to God through Christ, as the only true priest and intermediary. To Baptists, this means that everyone has an equally important role in the Kingdom, and that everyone is called to "minister" for the Gospel.

- Acts 6:1-6
- Hebrews 8:8-13
- 1 Corinthians 12:4-11
- Galatians 1:15-16
- 1 Peter 2:9

**Ask:**

- What do you think it means to see yourself as a "priest?"
- What role would this mean you (as a lay person) have in the church?
- What role do you think a pastor has in a church where everyone believes in the priesthood of all believers?
- 

### What do Baptists believe (15 minutes)

Again, you may read this section verbatim or elaborate in areas as need be. Encourage discussion throughout the reading.

The priesthood of believers means several things to a Baptist. First, it means they reject apostolic succession (in terms of its meaning that an authoritative voice arises in each generation, who is able to transmit the voice of God). Instead, they believe that at Pentecost (note: read Acts 2 if necessary), the Holy Spirit was given to all believers. This means that all believers are able to hear and respond to the voice and will of God.

This viewpoint therefore means that Baptists reject the idea that there can be one clear head in the church that has more authority than others. As we learned in the first lesson, Baptists see their only true church leader as the Lord.

Thirdly, the priesthood of all believers means that everyone has access to God as individuals. This differentiates from traditions that see another intermediary as necessary for faith.

Finally, the priesthood of all believers means that all members contribute to ministry in the body of Christ (consider 1 Corinthians 12:4-11). This means that they do not see one person as having more importance or relevance in the church than another. Although they do ordain clergy to their unique office, they would not argue that his role is more important or gives one a greater connection to God.

This was particularly evident in the early Baptist church when Baptists worked diligently to break down a distinction between clergy and laity. One author writes:

*“Baptists put in practice the priesthood of all believers and had no paid ministry released from the disciplines of ordinary life. In the country, the typical minister was a thatcher, a farmer, a maltser, a cheese-factor, in the town, the preacher had been during the week making shoes, pins, buttons, collars, hats, clothes, had been dying or upholstering or selling such wares, there might be found a scrivener, a writing-master, an apothecary, even a doctor . . . the score of ex-clergy were lost in the multitude of common men who ministered to their fellows, speaking out of an experience they shared with those they addressed. The priesthood of all believers was illustrated on a new scale.”*

**Ask:**

- How do you think this would have appeared to people at this time?

The CBOQ summarizes their view of the priesthood of all believers by saying:

“The Bible affirms the value of each person as having been created in the image of God, and also declares each person morally responsible for his/her own nature and behaviour. Baptists believe that inherent in the worth of each person is also the right and competency of each individual personally to deal directly with God through Jesus Christ. In essence, each person, by faith, becomes his/her own priest before God; hence, the cherished term “priesthood of all believers.” This implies that all believers share as equals in Christ’s body, the church, and in turn, have a priestly role towards each other.”

**Ask:**

- What do you think of this concept?
- Do you agree or disagree?
- How do you see the priesthood of all believers being lived out in your church today?

## A Story from History (Optional) (5 minutes)

The idea of the priesthood of all believers made a significant impact on American religion. In the 19th century a great movement called the Second Great Awakening began. This movement was revivalist in nature and included great meetings where many would become saved. At this time, however, the western frontier did not have great religious leanings. Many churches sought to move into the new frontiers, but two churches were particularly successful: the Methodists and the Baptists. Many believe that this stemmed from their flexible system of church leadership. In other words, if someone felt called to minister, preach, and share the Gospel, these denominations did not require that they get a formal education or be ordained for all ministries – a value that stemmed from the priesthood of all believers. Instead, if God called someone, they continued with their work and life during the week and served in ministry on Sundays and as needed at other times. because of this flexibility, they were able to move into the west with greater flexibility and more speed than other churches. Today, Baptists and Methodist churches are the largest denominations in the United States.

**Ask:**

- What does this teach us about the value of allowing people to share their gifts in all circumstances?
- What might have happened had Baptists not believed in the value of the priesthood of all believers?

**Discussion (10-15 minutes)**

Break the group into two smaller groups. Ask one group to come up with the advantages of the priesthood of all believers, and the other group to come up with the disadvantages. After you have given each group several minutes, ask them to present their ideas in a debate format, going back and forth over each point. If you have a group where you do not think a debate format would work, simply ask each side to share what they think the various advantages and disadvantages would be to this idea.

**Continue discussion by asking:**

- How does this distinctive shape Baptist churches?
- How do you think it affects ministry in our own church?
- How do you think it should influence ministry in our church?
- 

**Conclusion (5 minutes)**

Instead of returning to the scenario at the beginning, ask group members to consider how they would respond to someone who said that the pastor had a more important role in the body of Christ than other believers, or who believed that they needed someone to pray on their behalf to God, from a Baptist perspective.

Take a 5-minute stretch or coffee break before moving to the second half of the lesson.

## 4. Mission & Evangelism

### Scenario (5 minutes)

**Say:**

A Church missions committee needs to make a decision after being at a standstill in a heated meeting. For decades, the congregation had not significantly supported missions from its budget. Recently, the church had decided that it wanted to give a 10% of its operating budget towards missions. The missions committee decided to split some of the funds between local and global missions. However, it struggled to discern the nature of mission and what people and/or organizations it wanted to support. At the heart of the discussion was the question, should we be supporting evangelism and/or serving mission through the alleviation of suffering? Some people supported the idea that there are lots of groups feeding people but not everyone doing so in the name of Jesus. Others acknowledged that if someone does not eat, they cannot hear the gospel.

**Ask:**

- Why could this matter be so divisive? (because it hits at the nature of salvation, grace and the Gospel).
- Why do you think the idea of mission and evangelism can be so complicated for some Christians?

### Scripture: What does the Bible Say? (10 minutes)

**Say:** Baptists affirm that throughout the New Testament there is an invitation and challenge to participate in God's mission. To Baptists, this means that everyone has an equally important role in the Kingdom, and that everyone is called to proclaim the Gospel through word and deed.

- Matthew 9:37-38
- Matthew 28:19-20
- Mark 9:35-10:16
- Acts 1:8

**Ask:**

- What do you think it means that we are people of Good News?
- What does it mean for you to participate in the mission of God?
- What are the biggest challenges with “evangelism” these days?

## What do Baptists Believe (15 minutes)

Again, you may read this section verbatim or elaborate in areas as need be. Encourage discussion throughout the reading.

The CBOQ summarizes their view of mission and evangelism by saying:

”We have a story to tell that is mandated by our Lord in the Great Commission of Matthew 29:19-20. Our calling is to share God’s message of love and salvation with each person. Each Christian has a duty to share their faith with others. Baptists continue to be very active in mission efforts, both in local and global contexts.

We recognize that mission is not just evangelism, but also includes promoting justice, social welfare, healing, education and peace in the world. It is a holistic approach that expresses care for both the needs of the human soul and the social needs that affect all of life.”

### Ask:

- What do you think of this concept? Do you agree or disagree?
- How do you see mission and evangelism being lived out in your church today?

## A Story From History (Optional) (5 minutes)

The gospel was preached both in words and in deeds. Two missionaries who did this exceedingly well were sisters from Prince Edward Island, Martha and Zella Clark. They had responded to an appeal made in 1899 from Indian Christians to the Canadian Board to place missionaries in Sompeta, close to the border of Orissa State where Canadians were ministering to Telegu-speaking Indians.

In 1911, the two sisters moved to Sompeta to begin their work. Martha was the evangelist, and Zella, the medical doctor. Often the roles were reversed when Martha was forced to treat infections, wounds or disorders in Zella’s absence. Zella, in turn, was never hesitant to witness to her faith in words. Their dispensary was begun in a tent, and then moved into a two-room hut. They left Sompeta for other service in India, but their ministry in that small village set the stage for a modern, well-equipped hospital to be built there – the Arogyavaram Eye Hospital, whose work is not internationally recognized for its ‘mass-production’ eye surgery.

(See *The Eye Openers*, by William H. Jones, published 1977).

The Clark sisters were but two of scores of dedicated, unsung missionaries who served the Telegu-speaking people.”

Ask:

- **What does this example tell us about the nature of mission and evangelism?**
- **What might have happened had the Baptists not believed in the value of mission and evangelism?**

### E. Discussion (10-15 minutes)

Break the group into two smaller groups. Ask one group to come up with scriptures and the reasons for proclaiming the gospel through words and the other group to come up with scriptures and the reasons for proclaiming the gospel through deeds. After you have given each group several minutes, ask them to present their ideas in a debate format, going back and forth over each point. If you have a group where you do not think a debate format would work, simply ask each side to share what they think the various advantages and disadvantages would be to this idea.

Continue discussion by asking: **How does this distinctive shape Baptist churches? How do you think it affects ministry in our own church? How do you think it *should* influence ministry in our church?**

### F. Conclusion (5 minutes)

Instead of returning to the scenario at the beginning, ask group members to consider how they would respond to someone who claimed that missions and evangelism was from another era and shouldn't be done any more.

Jones, William H. *What Canadian Baptists Believe*. Niagara Falls, ON: JBTS Publishing House and Sales. 1980. 88.

# Freedom in the Common Life

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## Session Three

### Distinctives:

5. A Believers' Church Part A – Two Ordinances  
and/or
5. A Believers' Church Part B – Believers' Baptism By Immersion
6. Church Autonomy & Association

### Materials Needed:

- Bibles

**Note – You could focus on emphasizing that Baptists have two ordinances, or you could focus on Believers' Baptism By Immersion or combine the two sessions.**

### Introduction (10 minutes)

Begin by welcoming everyone back to the group. Ask the group to share briefly what you talked about last week, and to summarize the main ideas if possible. Ask if anyone has any further questions or thoughts coming out the previous week, or from their Bible study or reading over the last week.

**Say:** In honour of one of the distinctives we discussed two weeks ago (the Authority of Scripture) we will begin tonight with a brief devotional reading from Scripture. Get someone you have asked ahead of time to read Psalm 119: 33-40

Open in prayer.

**Say:** This week we will be studying two distinctives of Baptist life that are connected to each other, and the one key Baptist belief that is perhaps most distinctive to our Baptist identity. Again, as we chat please feel free to interject with questions and ideas.

## 5. A Believers' Church— Part A Two Ordinances

### Scenario (5 minutes)

**Read:** One day your friend calls you and she is obviously very frantic. She explains that her mother, who has been ill, is expected to die in the next few hours. She does not attend church, and therefore does not have a minister. She asks for you to call your minister so that he can come and give her “last rites.” You explain to your friend that your minister does not do last rites, but that you are sure he will go and visit and pray for her mother. She grows increasingly distressed and wants to know why your minister won’t do something so important, to help make sure her mother goes to heaven.

**Ask:** What would you say to your friend? Would you find yourself wondering why your minister would not do this? Do you think a Baptist minister should do last rites in this setting? **Say:** If you have attended a Baptist church for very long, you will have notices that we celebrate only two ordinances (a term we use in place of sacrament, which I will explain later): Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. This use of two ordinances is part of the first Baptist distinctive we will discuss tonight – A Believers’ Church.

### B. Scripture: What does the Bible Say? (10 minutes)

**Say:** As we have already learned, Baptists see Scripture as their source of authority for church life. This is also the case with the number of ordinances. For Baptists, the issue of ordinances is not so much about what Scripture says as much as what it does not say. Baptists argue that Scripture refers to only two ordinances specifically: Baptism and the Eucharist or Communion or Lord’s Supper.

**Read:**

- **Matthew 26:26-29**
- **1 Corinthians 11: 23-26**

**Say:** These passages are examples used by Baptists to illustrate that the Bible calls us to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Do you agree? Why do you think Baptists accepted this ordinance and not others? **Say:** We will discuss the passages about Baptism later tonight when we discuss that distinctive in particular.

### What Do Baptists Believe (10 minutes)

As usual, you may read this section verbatim, although you may stop and ask questions and get feedback and thoughts from participants as you go along. Feel free to elaborate certain areas if it will help your group understand this idea better – if you need more information about this distinctive, please consult the list of sources at the end of this project.

Again, based on Scripture, Baptists believe in only two ordinances. This contrasts the Roman Catholic church, for example, which has seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, marriage, ordination/holy orders, the Eucharist, healing, and last rites). Although they do participate in ordination, they believe that this is more of a symbolic gesture, and therefore not an ordinance in itself.

Baptists more often use the term ordinances over sacrament (although they technically are not against the use of the latter) because there was a time when the word sacrament seemed to imply a magical bestowal of divine power. Many Baptists continue to use the term ordinance over sacrament in order to avoid suggesting that either the Lord's Supper or Baptism invokes salvation or the Holy Spirit in themselves. Still, Baptists do not want to see the ordinances as "mere symbols." Hudson and Maring write: "The same God who had condescended to act in human history, to bring the Incarnate Son of God to birth in a stable, had ordained that other elements of our common life should be means of divine action. Through immersion in water and through the eating of simple bread and wine, human beings could be made more aware of God's presence and power."

**Ask:** Do you agree with this last statement?

In terms of the Lord's Supper specifically, Baptists continue to stress the fact that the Lord's Supper is a memorial meal. It is intended to remind the church of the foundation on which it rests and partaking of the meal together reminds participants of their new life as participants in the community of Christ. Early Baptists however, saw communion as more than mere memorial. They also believed that Christ was truly present to believers in the meal.

There is no prescribed system of celebrating the ordinance of the Lord's Supper in a Baptist church. Some churches continue to debate over the use of open (all people welcomed to take communion) or closed communion (only members allowed to take part in communion).

#### D. Discussion/Conclusion (10 minutes)

Ask questions such as:

- **Do you agree or disagree with the use of only two ordinances?**
- **Which word do you prefer – ordinance or sacrament?**
- **How does this distinctive affect life in a Baptist church?**

Take a five-minute stretch break before starting the next section, if time allows.

## 5. A Believers' Church Part B Believers' Baptism By Immersion

### Scenario (5 minutes)

**Say:** Your neighbour has been attending church with you over the last year or so. You are thrilled that he has been coming to church and were excited to see him make a true commitment to Christ a few months ago. One week the pastor announces that Membership classes are about to begin. Your friend has talked to you about wanting to be a member, as he longs to make that commitment to his church and serve in a greater leadership role. When you talk to him a few days later, however, he is very upset. He explains that he was told he could not be a member since he was not baptized as a believer. "I don't get it," he tells you, "my parents baptized me when I was a baby and I don't see why I should have to be baptized again."

#### Ask:

- **How would you answer your friend?**
- **Have you ever had a similar conversation with someone new to your church, or wondered about the same sort of scenario yourself?**

**Say:** The issue at hand here actually gets back to two key distinctives in the Baptist polity, which are closely connected and can easily be discussed together: Believer's Baptism by Immersion, which is connected to what some call Regenerate Membership (the belief that people must make a decision to follow Christ as an adult). Believer's baptism is a key element of Baptist belief, so we are going to spend a longer time looking at it in this session.

### Scripture: What does the Bible Say? (20 minutes)

**Say:** There are three main areas of Baptist thought when it comes to Baptism: (1) the need to Baptize, (2) Baptism is for believers, and therefore those old enough to understand what they are doing and (3) the preference to Baptize by immersion. We will explore the Scripture passages in relation to each of these areas. After each section, pause for discussion and feedback.

#### The Need for Baptism

- Matthew 3:13-17
- Matthew 28:19-20
- Mark 16:16
- Acts 8:32-39
- Acts 22:16

Ask questions like:

- **What do these passages tell us about baptism? How is it connected to faith in Christ?**

### **Baptism for Believers**

- Acts 2:38-41
- Acts 10:44-47
- Romans 10:9

**Say:** Baptists believe that Baptism is connected to belief in Christ and can only follow after someone has made a conscious decision to follow Christ. For this reason, Baptists only consider believers baptism true baptism. Baptists point out that there are no incidents in Scripture of an infant being baptized (although others use Acts 16:15, the story of the jailer and his family being baptized, to argue against this, saying that the household could include infants. Baptists say that there is no reason to assume infants were baptized in this passage – there may have been no infants in the household, or they may not have included infants in the baptism). What do you think?

### **The Use of Immersion**

- Romans 6:3-5
- Colossians 2:12

**Say:** Baptists use these passages to argue that baptism represents the death and the resurrection of Christ (with the going into the water being the symbol of going into the grave, and the coming up out of the water the symbol of resurrection). Therefore, baptism should take the form of true immersion. Ask: Do you agree?

## **What do Baptists Believe? (15 minutes)**

You may read this section verbatim, although you may stop and ask questions and get feedback and thoughts from participants as you go along. Feel free to elaborate certain areas if it will help your group understand this idea better.

Believer's Baptism was the significant issue that caused Baptists to separate from other churches of their day. At the time that Baptists were formed, specifically in England, all babies were baptized at birth into the Church of England, instantly making them "Christians," as they were taught. People such as John Smyth and Thomas Hewly, among others, began to believe that true baptism only follows belief in Christ. They "rebaptized" themselves to this end. However, they would never have argued that they were re-baptized. Instead, they believed that their first baptism as an infant was not a real baptism at all. This led to the persecution of Baptists for many decades, as the State saw this as a challenge to their authority, as babies were no longer instantly baptized in to the state church. At the time, the idea of a state not unified under one religion was distressing to ruling powers, as they ruled partially through the church. Many Baptists died and suffered because of their claim that baptism was for believers.

To Baptists, the belief in believer's baptism best honours the New Testament model. They believe that baptism must follow a true conversion experience and confession of faith. They argue that Baptism then becomes a sort of "active parable of the Lord's death, burial and resurrection" (Robinson). They do not believe that baptism in and of itself bring about salvation. Instead it is an outward sign of that salvation that has already taken place.

**Ask:**

- **If Baptists believe this about baptism, why do you think they do not practice infant baptism?**

However, while we have shown why Baptists believe that baptism is only for believers, the next question is: must all believers be baptized? Hudson and Maring argue that we must out of an act of obedience to God. Again, this does not mean that you are not saved if you are not baptized; instead, Baptists argue that Baptism is a human response to God's salvation, which allows people to publicly confess their faith.

Finally, we choose the mode of immersion as a symbol of the death and resurrection of Christ. Hudson and Maring write that, "immersion pictorially expresses our own identification with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection." Many people will list baptism by immersion as the distinctive Baptist view on baptism. However, it is really the issue of believer's baptism that is distinctive. Baptists prefer the symbolism of immersion, but are willing to use sprinkling for baptism in certain circumstances, such as when someone is aged or infirmed. Baptists would believe that a baptism committed by a believer in this way under such circumstances is still legitimate.

When Baptism is practiced in this way, it makes possible what is called a "regerated church membership" – this means that we have a church of believers who have made a conscious choice to become Christians.

**Ask:**

- Do you agree or disagree with these views of Baptism?
- Are there some you understand, but some you do not?
- Do you think it is possible to hold these preference but not make them manditory of church membership? Why or why not?

### A Story From History (Optional) (5 minutes)

**Say:** This reading is an account of a man who was questioned about his Baptist beliefs. This is a somewhat humorous account and highlights how early Baptists did not believe that infant baptism had any merit. The accused denied being "re-baptized," since he felt he had never been baptized in the first place! Read this account verbatim or ask someone else to read it ahead of time (some of the spelling is also difficult to follow, but it is quoted directly from the original account). The account is written in older English, so make sure it is read slowly, and prepare people to listen closely.

## The Account of John Clarke

When John Clarke and some of his peers baptized a man in 1651, they were arrested and sentenced to fines or whippings. One man refused to pay his fine and received thirty-nine lashes with a three-corded whip. This is an excerpt of Clarke's trial.

*We being by virtue hereof committed to prison upon the 5th day seven nights after we were brought to our tryall; in the forenoon we were examined, in the afternoon, without producing either accuser, witness, jury, law or God, or man, we were Sentenced; in our examination the Governor unbraided us with the name of AnaBaptists; To whom I answered, I disown the name, I am neither an AnaBaptist, nor a PedoBaptist, nor a CataBaptist; he told me in haste I was all; I told him he could not prove us to be either of them; He said, yes, you have Rebaptized. I denied it saying, I have baptized many, but I never Rebaptized any; then said he, you deny the former baptism, and make all our worship a nullity; I told him he said it; moreover I said unto them (for therefore do I conceive I was brought before them to be a testimony against them). If the Testimony which I hold forth be true, and according to the mind of God, which I undoubtedly affirm it is, then it concerns you to look to your standing . . . I testified that baptism, or dipping in Water, is one of the Commandments of this Lord Jesus Christ, and that a visible believer, or Disciple of Christ Jesus . . . is the only person that is to be baptized, or dipped with that visible baptism . . . I testify that no such believer, or Servant of Christ Jesus hath any liberty, much less Authority, from his Lord to smite his fellow servant, nor yet with outward force, or arm of flesh, to constrain, or restrain his Conscience, no nor yet his outward man for Conscience stake, or worship of his God, where injury is not offered to the person, name or estate of others, every man being such as shall appear before the judgment seat of Christ, and must give an account of himself to God and therefore ought to be and fully persuaded in his own mind, for what he undertakes, because he that doubteth is damned if he eat, and so also if he act, because he doeth no eat or act in Faith and what is not of Faith is sin.<sup>2</sup>*



John Clarke

### Ask:

- What did this man believe about baptism?
- Why did he make this judge so angry?

### Discussion (10 minutes)

Pair the groups into pairs. Ask each pair to come up with three arguments for and against believer's baptism. When they have finished, get them to share their ideas with the group. To continue discussion, **Ask:** What do you think this distinctive means for Baptists? What does it mean for our church specifically?

### Conclusion (5 minutes)

Return to the scenario discussed at the beginning of this section and ask people to respond to it from a Baptist perspective, considering: How would you answer his question about why believer's baptism is important?

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<sup>2</sup> Brackney, William H. Baptist Life and Thought. Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1998. 111. Print

## Closing (10 minutes)

As you did last week, go around the group to ask each person to share something they learned from the night and how they see it applying to their own church context.

Encourage them to meditate on the Scripture passage discussed throughout the week.

Close the evening in prayer.

## Further Reading

McDaniel, George W. "The Initial Christian Ordinance". *The People Called Baptists*. George W. McDaniel. 1st ed. Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1919. Chapter III. Print.

## 6. Church Autonomy & Association

### Scenario (5 minutes)

**Say:** In recent months, your Sunday School has been growing tremendously and become a great source of community outreach in your church. Everyone is very excited, but there is one issue: the current layout of your church building is not well structured to suit the growing needs of the Sunday School. One day you are out for coffee with your pastor and the issue comes up. She shares with you a vision she has for reorganizing several of the spaces to better accommodate the Sunday School. This shift would also involve changing the meeting time by half an hour of the Sunday morning service. You think this is a brilliant idea and hope to see it put in place soon. The next week when you come to church, however, the pastor announces that a new committee is forming to discuss the Sunday School space issue. It takes several weeks to form a committee and several more for it to come to a decision. When the final decisions have been made, they present a plan with space changes that will be quite effective, although you feel that the pastor's plan would have worked better. You wonder why the pastor didn't just tell the church what to do with the space, which would have saved time and, in your opinion, been more effective. Why bother, you wonder, with all the committees?

**Ask:** Have you ever experienced a scenario similar to this in your own church setting? Why do you think the pastor did not just go ahead with her own plan?

**Say:** The issue at work here is one that in many ways stems out of the belief in the priesthood of all believers. It is perhaps one of the more fundamental distinctives of Baptist life that separates Baptists from many other denominations. This distinctive is called Congregational Leadership (which is connected to something we call "Associations" that we will also discuss). This term refers to the way we structure the government of our local churches.

### Scripture: What does the Bible Say? (5 minutes)

**Say:** Baptists actually use many of the same passages discussed in the last section and in the first lesson about the Lordship of Christ to argue that all members of the church must function as equals with Christ as our only spiritual authority (feel free to review some of these texts if you feel this would be helpful). They further point to a lack of Scripture references to church hierarchy to illustrate that the creation of such hierarchies in church government is an extra-biblical invention.

### What do Baptists Believe? (15-20 minutes)

In this section, you may again read the information verbatim or modify some of the information to suit your group's needs. In this circumstance, questions have been intentionally integrated throughout the reading. Note that some members of your group may have come from heritages that use some of the governance models discussed here; encourage these participants to share their own perspectives on these other governing systems.

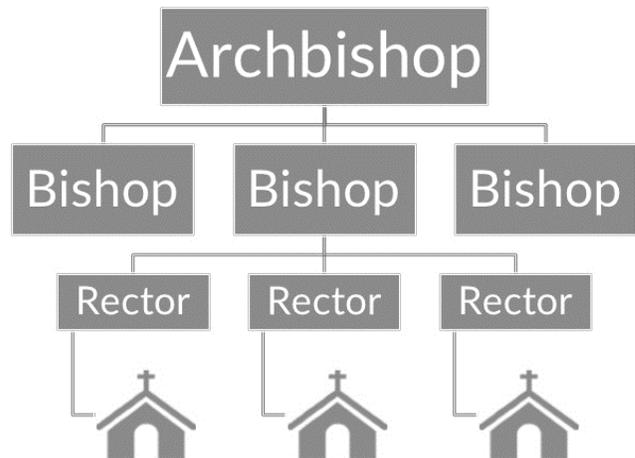
**Say:** To understand the Baptist view of governance, it is helpful to understand the three main government systems used in varying denominations.

## Episcopal Governments

Remember first that any issue of church government involves the question of where authority in the church lies. In this system, the authority lies with a bishop, who is in charge of a diocese or geographical area. This is a top/down hierarchical structure. Individual churches must receive permission and authority from denominational “higher ups” for things such as hiring clergy or doctrinal change. Decisions about doctrine and practice would be made by those in authority.

### Ask:

- Can you think of churches that function in this way? (e.g. Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church of Canada)

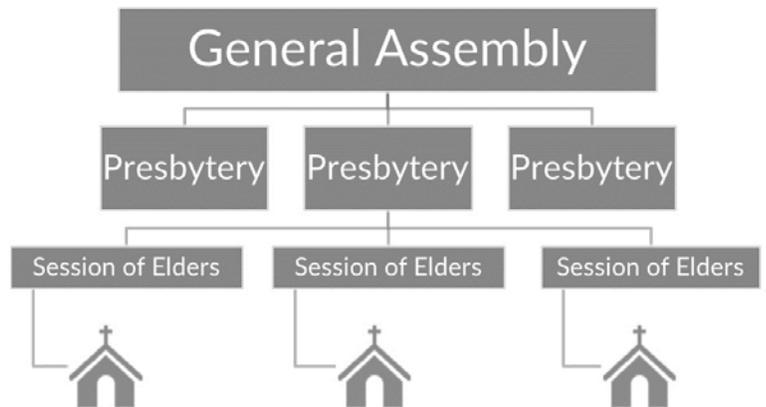


## Presbytery Models

A second form of government uses a presbytery model. This model falls somewhere in between the Episcopal and congregational models. Here, there is not a bishop, but a group called the presbytery that is made up of both clergy and lay people. Each geographical area would have a presbytery. When decisions need to be made, a local church decides on issues together, but must get approval or permission from the presbytery to act. In this way authority lies with the presbytery. Lay people do have some say in this model, as they make up an equal number of the presbytery as the clergy.

### Ask:

- Can you think of examples of churches that use this model of governance? (e.g. Presbyterian churches, Reformed churches)



## Congregational Governments

Baptist churches use a congregational government. This model maintains that the church is a democracy. Therefore, authority lies simply with the LOCAL CHURCH, where every member must have an equal voice.

Within this model, people in a local church would have different roles. A simplistic model might say that the minister would look after worship, while deacons and elders look after maintenance of the church and other

ministries, although this will vary as a local church decides. Ministers are hired and ordained by a local congregation, not sent by a higher denominational body. In a Baptist church, because all members are seen as equals, when a decision is to be made, a committee will generally be formed who will gather information for the congregation at large. The congregation will then vote for or against their ideas, with everyone (including the minister) having one vote.

Within this view also lies the idea that local churches do not have a denominational authority over them. Some call this “local church autonomy.” This means that the denominational body is not “above” a local church. Instead, Baptist churches will often form into what are called associations. These are groups of Baptist churches that have common confessions of faith and have chosen to join together for support, unity and mission. Within an association, there may be a statement of faith; however, no church can be forced to comply with a particular issue. Instead, a church with vast disagreements with the association may simply choose not to “associate” anymore – associations are always voluntary on the part of any church.

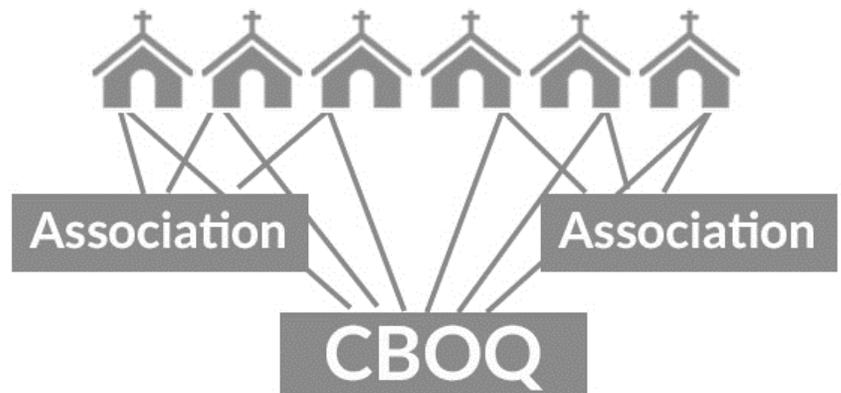
In the CBOQ specifically, there are three main bodies that flow into each other.

The local church (where authority lies under a congregational system)

The Association (in our family of churches, there are 16 associations. These come together for various tasks, namely support. However, the association also help in the ordination process, ministry placement, etc.)

The Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec (this is a group of associations.) Once a year CBOQ meets to discuss issues that it will decide to stand behind. Each church sends delegates to this Assembly, who all have an equal voice in voting on church policy. Leaders in the convention cannot demand that a certain action be taken.

Again, however, the authority lies in the local church congregation (hence the term “congregationalism”). The local body makes decisions based on God’s direction about their own church.



### Ask:

- How have you seen this principle at work in your own church?
- Which form of the church government would you think would work best?
- Do you agree with the Baptist stance on congregational government? Why or why not?
- Do you agree with the old joke that says that Baptists are a church “ruled by committee”?

## A Story from Church History (5 minutes)

During the early years of the 21st century, Canada began to discuss the possibility of legalizing same sex marriage. Many churches and denominations throughout the country balked at such an idea and moved quickly to create clear doctrines that would prevent this practice from taking place in their own churches.

In the CBOQ Assembly of 2004, this issue came before the Assembly. Many wanted to come up with a clear policy that they would stand behind saying that they as a convention did not condone same sex marriage. However, while many did oppose same sex marriage, many of these same people had great issue with this proposal. At issue in their mind was the question of Baptist polity. In other words, does this imply that the CBOQ would tell churches what to believe? To many this goes against the value of congregational autonomy. Those who supported the creation of a policy said that the goal was not to create a mandate that churches would have to follow; instead, they hoped to create a policy that everyone would agree reflected their own views, so they could take a unified stance as a convention. Those who did not agree with the policy could simply choose not to be a part of the Association anymore.

At the end of the Assembly, the CBOQ had agreed by majority vote to adopt a statement affirming that we understand marriage to be solely between a man and a woman, although some did vote against the motion. In the following year, a second resolution was passed that said that if an accredited CBOQ pastor performed a same-sex marriage, his or her accreditation would be suspended. (The responsibility to accredit and discipline pastors has long been managed by the CBOQ, with a resolution and positive vote of the gathered Assembly asking this on behalf of the local churches. (Notice again the principle: local churches associating to do together what is difficult to do alone!)

### Ask:

- Do you understand why some people saw this as an issue of polity?
- Why would it be inappropriate for the denomination to tell churches what they had to do or practice under this governance system?
- Recognizing their upholding of congregational government, do you think the denomination was appropriate in the actions taken in this situation?

(NOTE TO PRESENTER: given the wide range of attitudes attached to the issue of same-sex attraction and marriage, for the purpose of this discussion, try to keep the group focused on the issues of autonomy and association, rather than the question of what individuals believe about the orientation and marriage questions. That may well be a discussion for another time.)

## Discussion (15 minutes)

**Say:** This principle is one that causes great confusion and frustration in many Baptist churches. However, when it is understood correctly, we can also see that it represents powerful and biblical concepts. What do you see as the advantages of congregational government?

List these together (use a whiteboard or large paper with two columns – one for advantages and one for disadvantages). These include:

- It honours the priesthood of all believers
- It recognizes the Lord as the ultimate head of the church

- It allows individual churches to speak and minister in their own context, without having to consult with a “higher up” for logistical approval
- It grants churches individual freedom to develop and evolve where God leads them
- It creates processes that make sure more members are “on board” before a process moves forward; an individual or group of powerful individuals cannot simply make arbitrary decisions that the entire body does not agree with

People in the group may also come up with different advantages to list.

**Ask:**

- Where have you seen this type of government create difficulties?

List these disadvantages together:

- It can mean that processes move more slowly, as it is necessary to wait for a larger group of people to “latch on” to a vision before it advances
- It can lead to splits or division in churches when people cannot come to agreement (this is a case, however, where someone in a pastor role can take the leadership role and helping to move towards great reconciliation; however, he or she still cannot usurp democracy and enforce one viewpoint)
- It can create difficulties when people feel they have “lost” a vote, especially if the margin of difference between the “winning” and “losing” side was small. This brings up the question: Is 50 +1 enough to say that the “whole” church is behind an issue? There may be a large majority that still disagree, even after a vote has passed.

People in the group may also come up with other disadvantages to add.

**Discuss:**

- Do you think the advantages outweigh the disadvantages?
- How does understanding the process of congregational government help you understand our church’s policies?
- Do committees make more sense when one considers their important role in Baptist polity?
- 

**Conclusion (5 minutes)**

Return to the scenario at the beginning of the session and ask people to respond to it from a “Baptist” perspective.

**Ask:**

- How would you respond to someone who asked why there was a need for so many committees in a Baptist church after this session?

**Closing (10 minutes)**

As you did last week, go around the group to ask each person to share something that they have learned, and how they see this lesson applying to their own church context.

Encourage them to meditate on the Scripture passages discussed throughout the week. Close the evening in prayer.

## Further Reading

Straton, Hilary H. "Democracy, Our Church Ideal". *Baptists: Their Mission And Message*. Hilary H. Straton. 1st ed. Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1941. Chapter 5. Print.

# Let Freedom Reign!

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## Session Four

### Distinctives:

7. Freedom & Equality Part A – Soul Liberty
7. Freedom & Equality Part b – Separation of Church & State

**Materials Needed:** Bibles, list of questions participants asked in the first session

### Introduction (10 minutes)

Begin by welcoming everyone to the group. Ask anyone if they have any questions or thoughts after last week or coming out of the Scripture texts or readings they reviewed this week.

**Say:** Thus far we have discussed six Baptist distinctives (briefly list and describe the distinctives from each week). Last week we talked about A believers' Church and Church Autonomy & Association. Let's begin tonight by meditating on a passage we discussed then: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. Read the passage yourself or ask someone to read the text.

Open in prayer.

## 7. Freedom & Equality: Part A – Soul Liberty

### Scenario (5 minutes)

**Say:** You have been asked to do a door-to-door survey around your neighbourhood for your church, finding out what the needs and concerns are in your area. One of the questions on the survey asks: "What religion are you?" At one door you speak with a young man who responds "Well, I'm a Christian." You are excited to have met a fellow Christian and ask him what church he attends. He explains that he does not go to church or "really do any of that stuff." As you talk more, you realize that he has never really made any faith commitment. Eventually you ask, "Why do you say that you are a Christian?" He responds "Well, my parents are both Christians, so I figure that makes me one."

### Ask:

- How would you respond to that statement, or one like it in another context?
- Do you think this young man is really a Christian?
- Do you think you can be "born into" Christianity?

**Say:** It may seem odd to some of us to think that people could claim a certain faith just because it is their parents. In the days when Baptists began, however, this idea was common. because everyone lived in a "Christian" state, everyone was considered a Christian. They were literally "born into" their faith. Furthermore, the state could literally force people to be Christians, forcing religious allegiance to the church because of state control. Baptists reacted against this, forming a distinctive that they still claim today: Soul Liberty.

## Scripture: What does the Bible Say? (10 minutes)

**Say:** Baptists use many Scripture texts to support the idea of Soul Liberty.

**Read** the following texts together, discussing them as you Read:

- Luke 13:3
- Luke 12:34
- John 3:14-17
- Ephesians 2:8

**Say:** These passages illustrate that an individual is personally responsible for seeking his or her own Salvation, and that Christ does not coerce anyone into faith. This means that each person is responsible for his or her own soul. You cannot be saved based on someone else's belief, and no one can force you to believe. **Ask:** Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

## What Do Baptists believe (10 minutes)

You may read this section verbatim or change it to suit your group's needs.

As already implied, there are two aspects to the Baptist belief in Soul Liberty. The first is the idea of the “competency of the soul” – each person is personally responsible to God, and capable of making a decision for or against faith on their own. This means that individuals cannot claim Christianity based on the faith of their family or their nation. Again, this connects back to the time when this would have been common practice.

To Baptists, however, this also means that the state cannot impel anyone to faith. John Smyth, who you will recall was the first Baptist, wrote: *“That the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force and compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine; but to leave Christian religion free, to every man’s conscience, and to handle only civil transgressions, injuries and wrongs of men against man.”*

Today, it is hard for us to picture our Prime Minister or Member of Parliament (MP) telling us that we must be a Christian – or any other faith! Yet, that was common practice in the time that Baptists began. Again, many Baptists were persecuted and died for such a claim, as the state believed at the time that such an idea would usurp state authority. When Thomas Helwys wrote a book making claims of soul liberty and religious freedom, he was thrown in prison. In 1662, England passed what was called “The Act of Uniformity,” which declared that only episcopal ordination was valid. This meant that all English people had to be the Church of England. Three other acts then were passed that demanded that magistrates suppress any religion outside of the Church of England, that prohibited more than five people from gathering outside the Church of England to practice religion and that expelled any minister who was not from the Church of England from preaching within five miles of his place of ministry. When early settlers came to the United States, many communities also tried to mandate one type of religious practice. This contrasted the Baptist view of soul liberty and led to their call for the separation of church and state, which we will discuss in the next distinctive.

The idea of soul liberty was a radical one in its suggestions. The passion of the Baptists was for only “true Christians” to call themselves such. They believed that mandated Christianity was not true belief. As one man wrote: “The civil power can make a nation of hypocrites and infidels, but not one of Christians.”

Baptists continue to value soul liberty today.

## Ask:

- Do you agree with this claim?
- Why do you think it was so important for Baptists to insist for Soul Liberty?
- Do you think this made their church more or less attractive to new people – was this a “risky” move?

## A Story from History (Optional) (5 minutes)

During the time that England was oppressing people outside of the State religion, many individuals were persecuted. One such man was Joseph Davis. In his own words, he describes the suffering he experienced for his belief. You may read this excerpt yourself or ask someone else to read it. Warn them that the language is old English, so make sure the person reading it takes their time.

### Prison Experience of Joseph Davis

*About the time the king entered London, I was illegally seized by the country-troops, and carried a prisoner seven miles from my habitation and calling, to Burford, and there detained two days, being oftentimes temped to drink the King's health; but out of conscience I as often refused so vain an action, thought I began to be very much the custom of the time.*

*My second imprisonment was after Venner's unlawful insurrection, when the militia of the county Horse and Foot . . . came on the seventh day in the evening to our town, and Mr. Hoad, one of the captain of the county troops, came to my shop, asking my name and demanding arms, rudely made me prisoner for nothing; my house was rifled by his soldiers, who took away my goods feloniously . . . when Lord Lieutenant Faulkland came . . . he rendered me the oath of allegiance which I did not refuse, and then demanding the good behaviour, the break of which they interpreted would be going to an separate assembly, for the sake of religious worship. This arbitrary demand I refused indeed and was . . . on Monday sent to Oxford Caste, with others of my honest neighbours, until the Lent Assizes, when no matter being alleged against us, we were privately released by the Lord Lieutenant.*

*In January the year following, one Worge, a constable, as he said, had verbal order from the Lord Faulkland, to take me up again, and carry me to Oxford, which he did accordingly; and with such a guard as if I had been a criminal, though without any warrant of commitment and delivered me a prisoner to the goaler, where I was detained til the Lent Assizes, and then obtained to be called.*

*The judge would know what I was committed for; and after I had opened the case to him he replied, “I must not interfere with the Lord Lieutenant's power”; and so I was remanded back to prison until the Summer Assizes . . . but then, having a more just judge . . . he released me; the Lord Faulkland, my adversary, having before this, been summoned by death, to the great tribunal.*

*The next spring I was committed to prison by Sir Thomas Pennison Deputy Lieutenant . . . where I remained about two years, and appeared in Court, where he was present, I told him before the judge of the Session that the English Laws were tender of men's liberty, and did not countenance the keeping them always, no, for so long in prison, although legal occasion had been given for the “Behaviour” to be required; whereas I had broken a law, nor was charged with the break of any by my commitment . . . and they, whispered together, maliciously tendered the Oath of Allegiance. I answered them, I had taken it already . . . but*

*however, in a few sessions they praemunired me, which I severity is the loss of all my goods and chattels and imprisonment during the King's pleasure. A frightful sentence, had not by God restrained the execution.<sup>3</sup>*

**Ask:**

- Do you think Soul Liberty was worth all this suffering?
- Why do you think it was so important to this man and other early Baptists like him?

### Discussion (5 minutes)

**Ask:**

- Do you agree with the concept of Soul Liberty?
- How do you think it affects ministry in a Baptist church?
- How would it affect ministry in our own specific church?
- How might our faith look different if we did not support his claim?
- If one believes in Soul Liberty, what relationship do you think this implies for the state (or the government's) role in religion?

### Conclusion (5 minutes)

Consider the scenario we discussed at the beginning of this distinctive. What would be a “Baptist response” to that scenario?

Allow a brief break before beginning discussion of the next distinctive.

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<sup>3</sup> Brackney, William H. Baptist Life and Thought. Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1998. 74-75. Print.

## 8. Freedom & Equality: Part B – Separation of Church & State

### Scenario (5 minutes)

**Say:** An election is coming up and you are chatting with some friends from church about the various issues up for debate. Some of you begin sharing other issues that you feel have been overlooked in the election platforms, and one of your friends says: “Personally, I think the main issue in our country is that we have stopped being a Christian nation. We need to keep people from spreading false religions and challenging Christian viewpoints.” When you ask her to elaborate, she explains: “I think the government should make it illegal for people like Jehovah’s Witnesses to go door to door, or for schools to teach religions like Buddhism or Hinduism.” When you ask her if she thinks Christians should still be allowed to share their faith, she says: “Of course! That is what this country needs. We just need the government to start teaching people how to live like Christians.” At this point, one of your friends interjects, “Well that certainly wouldn’t be a Baptist viewpoint to take!” You wonder what she means by that last statement. Don’t Baptists think that we should spread the Christian faith?

#### **Ask:**

- What do you think your one friend meant by saying your other friend’s position was not one a Baptist would take? Do you agree with your friend?
- What role do you think the church should have in government practice?

**Say:** This issue relates back to our final Baptist distinctive that is significant in Baptist heritage: The Separation of Church and State, or “Religious Liberty.” Again, this viewpoint may seem common today, as we no longer belong to a society in which the church and the government are integrated or woven together. However, many believe that Baptists can see the integration of this belief into society as one of their own contributions to modern life. Indeed, what we now take for granted today as a modern societal given, many early Baptists lived and died to earn.

### Scripture: What does the Bible Say? (10 minutes)

There are several passages that Baptists use to argue that the Church and the State must be separate. Look up these texts as a group and discuss what they mean.

- Matthew 22:15-22
- Romans 13:1-7
- 1 Timothy 2:1-2

#### **Ask:**

- What do you think these passages say about the role of the Church in the State (government)?

**Say:** Many Baptists argue that these passages indicate that the Church and the State are separate; while the church supports the state in its leadership, it does not expect the State to rule the church or vice versa. Do you agree?

## What do Baptists believe? (15 minutes)

You may read this section verbatim or change it as need be to suit your group's needs. Encourage discussion and questions throughout your reading.

As we have discussed in the past, Baptists began at a time when there was no church and state separation. This meant that the state made laws about how the church should function, and the church expected to influence the state. When many denominations were starting to form during the Reformation that countered the state religion, few in fact sought the goal of standing apart from the state. Instead, religions such as the Reformed, Lutheran, or Presbyterian churches hoped to replace the state church with their own. Baptists never supported such an idea. Since they believed in Soul Liberty, they maintained that the state should not have any say over the church. (Note: while AnaBaptists also maintain this belief, their approach was different than Baptists in that they sought to begin another society all together. This differed from Baptists who still saw themselves as part of society and as submissive to the state, except in terms of religious matters).

The separation of church and state is synonymous with the term “religious liberty” in Baptist circles. Baptists believe that all religion is voluntary; therefore, they believe in the religious liberty of all groups. They would never say that a society should compel a certain religion; yet this does not mean that they are “anti-state.” Instead it is better stated to say that they are “anti-state church.” They argue that the state and church fulfill separate function from each other. For example, the state deals with the material wellbeing of its citizens, while the church deals with the spiritual well-being.

Finally, it is important to point out that this does not mean that Baptists do not hope to influence the government, or to see the state function in a Christian Manner. However, they recognize that they cannot control the government or its people. They would still see all the church as having the role of encouraging government to make ethical and moral decisions that they believe would be for the good of the country; however, they would never expect that the government should be responsible for mandating Kingdom principles and requiring everyone to live by them. While they would be happy to live in a “Christian Country,” if this meant that it was a country where everyone was sincerely a Christian, they have no interest in declaring a nation a “Christian country” if it is full of people who do not believe as they do.

### Ask:

- Do you agree with the Baptist position on this issue? Why or why not?

## A Story from History (Optional) (10 minutes)

Two interesting accounts bear testament to the great influence of Baptists on our nations because of this perspective. If time allows, sharing each of these stories is worthwhile.

### **Roger Williams**

In the United States, the earliest colonial settings faced many religious difficulties. In Massachusetts, early Puritans came to the Colony with the hopes of developing a true Christian society based on their own views. They were extremely intolerant of people who did not maintain their principles in their midst. One such man was a Baptist named Roger Williams. Williams began his ministry in a church in Salem in 1631 but was soon banned from the settlement because he taught about religious liberty. In this society, the idea that people could choose to believe differently than the state religion was abhorred. Williams then went to Providence, Rhode Island, where he started a settlement founded on religious liberty. The settlement developed a code of laws, which stated: “Our royal will and pleasure

is, that no person within the said colony . . . shall be in any ways molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question, for any differences of opinion in matters of religion.” This was a radical statement at a time when many societies would indeed punish people quite harshly for challenging the state’s chosen faith. It is believed that this is the first government in the world whose cornerstone was religious liberty. As more colonies developed such laws, many now argue that the United States’ development as a nation of religious liberty owes much to these Baptist teachings.

### **The University Question**

In Canada, Baptists also remained united in their call for religious liberty, despite much opposition to their claims. Early in the nation’s development, a number of denominations (such as the Church of England and Presbyterianism) clamored for denominational control over the new area, but Baptists refrained from such a practice, and argued that the new land should not declare one religion its own as a matter of state mandate. One issue where the Baptist voice proved particularly relevant involved what has become known as the “University Question.” This question involved the state control and support of denominational Universities. Baptists argued against this, saying that religions should not take money from the state for the teaching of their own doctrine – instead, denominations should support their own schools. While other denominations fought over what denomination should have control over, specifically, the University of Toronto, Baptists argued that no denomination should have such control. This was obviously a profound claim, since it meant that they were turning down government support in order to stay true to their convictions about church/state separation. Eventually, the Baptist view won out, which led to the University of Toronto being declared a secular school, with a separate Baptist seminary attached supported by Baptist funds only. Thus, Baptists helped ensure that there would be common schools where education was available to everyone. McLaughlin has argued that this value became the foundation of our country’s modern education system.

#### **Ask:**

- Do you agree with the position the Baptists took in this situation? Why or why not?
- How much either of these countries evolved differently without the value of separation of church and state?

### **Discussion (10 minutes)**

In pairs, ask the group to consider the advantages and disadvantages of this distinctive, before sharing their ideas with the group.

#### **To continue discussion, Ask:**

- Based on this distinctive, what role do you think Baptists should take in government issues today?
- How can Baptists continue to be proponents of religious freedom?
- How do you think this distinctive influences ministry of our churches . . . how should it?

### **Conclusion (5 minutes)**

#### **Ask:**

- In considering the situation discussed earlier and others like them, what do you think a Baptist response would be to the idea of enforcing a “Christian country?”

## Closing (15-20 minutes)

As in other weeks, begin by asking people to share one thing they learned this week from these two distinctives. Then, recognizing that it is the last week, pull out the chart that you made in the first week about people's questions about Baptist life. Go through each question and put them to the class, allowing time for discussion. Try to focus on those that deal with issues relating to these distinctives. When you have finished, go around the room and ask people to share how this course will influence how they understand their church ministry.

Allow for a time for people to ask any further clarifying questions or to make any further comments. As in the past weeks, encourage participants to review the verses for the week and to continue reading and study.

As you close the evening, make sure to thank all participants for attending and let them know of future times you will run the elective for those what want to tell their friends about future meetings. You may also want to give them a few minutes to fill out a "feedback sheet" so that you know how the course went and how to help it run more effectively in future.

Finally, conclude by saying something like this: The purpose of this elective has not been to teach that Baptists are better than other denominations. Many denominations have many of these same values, and many with differing values continue to be used by God. Instead, we want you to think about some of the ways that God has called Baptists in particular to share and live out their faith. My hope from teaching this course is that you will better understand the foundations of some of Baptist policy so that you can better understand our church and how you fit in it. Let's keep praying about how God is using and will continue to use us who have been called to serve in the Baptist church.

Close in prayer.

## Further Reading

Robinson, H. Wheeler. "The Strength and Weakness Of The Baptists". *A Baptist Treasury*. Snyder L. Stealy. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1958. Print.

# FURTHER LEARNING

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A Baptist bibliography compiled by Adam Rudy

Brackney, William H. *Baptist Life and Thought*. Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1998. Print.

This book covers a wide scope of topics within the larger topic of Baptist history in North America. It is essentially a massive compilation of primary source excerpts organized to give insight into particular topics in various time periods.

Brackney, William H. *The Baptists*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988. Print.

This work gives a detailed history of the Baptist tradition through focusing on trends over time. It was helpful for giving insight into the long-time problem, for Baptists, of defining Baptist identity.

Brackney, William H. *The Baptists*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988. Print.

This work, much like the two above by this author, covers much the same material but draws on updated scholarship.

Coops, P. Lorraine. "Shelter From the Storm: The Enduring Evangelical Impulse of Baptists in Canada, 1880s To 1990s". *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience*. Ed. George A. Rawlyk. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997. Print.

This chapter describes and discusses the various ways in which Canadian Baptists have stayed true to their evangelical heritage. Understanding Canadian Baptists as evangelical, and the role evangelicalism has had in shaping their identity, is essential to understanding who they are today.

Haykin, Michael A.G. and Ian Hugh Clary. "O God of Battle: The Canadian Baptist Experience of the Great War". *Canadian Churches and The First World War*. Ed. Gordon L. Heath. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014. Print.

This chapter, in an excellent book, provides a description and discussion of Canadian Baptists' experience of World War I. It illustrates the forces of influence that Baptists were under and how they responded to these, and ultimately, how they defined themselves in a context of British imperialism.

Chute, Anthony L, Nathan A Finn, and Michael A. G Haykin. *The Baptist Story*. Nashville, TN. 2015. Print.

This book provides a survey of Baptist history from its beginnings in the seventeenth century, up to the twenty-first century. Of particular value is the explanation of Baptist principles and how they are interconnected and interdependent. This survey of Baptist history is also reveals the DNA of the movement as well as some of their impulses behind it through the centuries.

Heath, Gordon L. "Flirting with Nirvana: The Canadian Baptist View of Warfare, 1919-1939." Thesis. Acadia University, 1994. Print.

This work provides a window into Canadian Baptists' experience after World War I. Heath shows how they, generally, embraced pacifism out of the belief that war was disastrous and should be avoided at all costs. by 1939, however, their pacifism had been discarded as they joined the "Holy War" against Nazi Germany.

Heath, Gordon L and Paul R Wilson. *Baptists and Public Life In Canada*. Hamilton, ON. McMaster Divinity College Press, 2012. Print.

This book details the many ways Baptists have been involved in, or exerted influence on, the public life of Canada over the last two centuries. There are three sections, each with several chapters. The first focuses on Baptist individuals and their influence in Canadian public life. The second looks at Baptist responses to conflict, and, the third looks at Baptist initiatives and public life in general.

Lewchuk, Richard P. "The Curriculum Controversy of the 1960s in the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec." Thesis. McMaster Divinity College, 1980. Print.

This work provides an in-depth and fascinating account of the New Curriculum Controversy of 1964. The BCOQ's association, and partnership, with the United Church of Canada for the printing of Sunday School curriculum became the source of a near schism within the convention, nearly echoing the disastrous split of 1927.

Mikolaski, Samuel. "Identity and Mission". *Baptists in Canada: Search for Identity Amidst Diversity*. Ed. Jarold K. Zeman. Burlington, ON: Welch, 1980. 1-20. Print.

Mikolaski emphasizes the connection between identity and mission and provides a history of Baptist identity since the late nineteenth century.

Morrison, Barry D. "Tradition and Traditionalism in Baptist Life And Thought". *Memory and Hope: Strands Of Canadian Baptist History*. Ed. David T. Priestley. Canada: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1996. Print.

Morrison argues that Baptists have maintained a tradition with respect to the Lord's Supper and that this tradition should be embraced.

Pinnock, Clark. "The Modernist Impulse at McMaster, 1887-1927." *Baptists in Canada: Search for Identity Amidst Diversity*. Ed. Jarold K. Zeman. Burlington, ON: Welch, 1980. 1-20. Print.

Pinnock provides a detailed account of the modernist vs. fundamentalist controversies within the CBOQ and the subsequent schism in 1927.

Renfree, Harry A. *Heritage & Horizon*. Mississauga, ON: Canadian Baptist Federation, 1988. Print.

Renfree's work is the first and only work to detail the entire history of Baptists in Canada and is therefore a valuable resource. He argues that the ecumenical movement usually brings on Canadian Baptist's identity crises. More specifically, he argues that denominational lines in matters of faith, amongst the mainline churches, had become obscure. This identity crisis produced the Baptist Federation of Canada. Unfortunately, a major weakness in his argument is the fact that he does not show the linkage between the crisis and the birth of the Federation.

Rawlyk, George A. *In Search Of the Canadian Baptist Identity*. Kingston, ON: Alex Zander Press, 1991. Print.

This book is a compilation of a series of sermons given at First Baptist Church in Kingston, on the occasion of its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary. Each of the four sermons discussed the lack of a distinctive Baptist identity and suggested strategies for renewing Baptist identity. The first sermon, given by Rawlyk, questioned if there were in fact any Baptist distinctives left.

Zeman, Jarold K. *Baptists in Canada*. Burlington, ON: G.R. Welch, 1980. Print.

This volume provides a broad sampling of Baptist history. Part one is concerned with influences and Baptist identity; Part two with Baptists and public life and social responsibility, and Part three with theological trends and conflicts among Baptists.

Zeman, Jarold K. *Baptist Roots and Identity*. Toronto, ON: Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec, 1978. Print.

Zeman argues that the search for a Canadian Baptist identity, ongoing since the infamous schism caused by the modernist-fundamentalist controversies in the 1920s, has been in part motivated, and made more urgent, by the growing ecumenical movement. Like Harry Renfree, Zeman sees the fading of distinctive Baptist identifiers as the result of a blurring of denominational lines.

Zeman, Jarold K. "The Changing Baptist Identity In Canada Since World War II". *Celebrating The Canadian Baptist Heritage*. Paul Dekar and Murray Ford. Hamilton, ON: McMaster Divinity College, 1985. 1-19. Print.

Zeman explores Baptist identity since 1945 and presents a comprehensive approach to understanding the identity of a group, something which, he argues, is always understood relationally and contextually. He points out that Baptists in Canada have been faced with the option of Baptist identity trumping national and cultural identity, or vice versa. He also argues, contra Mikolaski, that the Baptists have never fully succumbed to the draw toward "establishmentarian" Christianity but have existed in tension between the establishment and the "sects."

## Available on [www.Baptist.ca](http://www.Baptist.ca)

- This We Believe: Resources for Faith with Baptist Distinctives (revised 2010)
  - A Baptist Study Guide
- Why Baptist? (2016)
  - A discussion guide about Baptist uniqueness
- Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America (1997)
  - reposted on [www.Baptist.ca](http://www.Baptist.ca)

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