



# Baptist Churches: An Introduction



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Congratulations! You have made contact with a Baptist church. This will be one of at least 2500 Baptist churches in the British Isles and tens of thousands across the globe. You may be asking, how is a Baptist church different from any other church? This leaflet answers that question by giving a short introduction to what a typical Baptist church might look like, do and believe.

## But first,

Every Baptist congregation is different. Baptist churches meet in different kinds of buildings, adopt various styles of worship and may even have differing convictions on some matters. Exactly the same is true of other denominations, of course. It is also true that most of what Baptists believe places them in mainstream Christianity whereby, they share a common faith with other Christian denominations. In a Baptist church there may be some things that are immediately obvious to any visitor. For instance,

- Baptist worship is relatively simple without a large amount of material read from a prayer book;
- A strong emphasis is placed on preaching and this is likely to take up a fair part of any service;
- Ministers may be wearing special robes but are more likely to be dressed like anybody else;
- Church life can be quite busy. Baptists enjoy being together and try to live as an open and welcoming community;

- When they celebrate communion, the bread and wine (usually non-alcoholic) are normally passed around the congregation rather than received at the front of the church;
- When baptisms take place, this is by full immersion, and those being baptised are old enough to have made their own decision. This is where the name 'Baptist' comes from;
- When new born children are welcomed into the church community, this is through a short service called 'infant presentation', or sometimes 'dedication', in which the child is blessed and the parents and the congregation make promises. But they are not baptised.

These ways of doing things reflect some basic beliefs about what is important in being a Christian with Baptist beliefs.



## Basic Beliefs

Baptism is a good place to start when talking about basic Christian beliefs. Baptists do not practise infant baptism but what is called 'believers' baptism'<sup>1</sup>. This is because being a Christian involves making a choice to follow Jesus



Christ, and nobody else can make this decision for us. It is a personal decision and infants are too young to make it. To be sincere, faith has to be free, and not compelled. Believers' baptism symbolises this free decision.

Following on from this, Baptists believe in the 'free church' principle, that is, that

each congregation is free to make its own decisions under God. This means that Baptist churches are characterised by the very significant involvement of their members in making decisions about the life of the church. This is a process that others would describe as 'democracy'. Baptists prefer to think of it as 'discerning the mind of Christ'<sup>2</sup>. They have also always been committed to the need for religious liberty and a free society in which to live.

## A Baptist DNA

Baptist churches believe in

- The lordship of Christ that sets us free to be our true selves;
- The authority of the bible, because in the bible we learn about Christ;
- Believers' baptism, because it expresses a truly personal faith;
- A free or believers' church, because it is a genuine expression of Christian community and consists of people who have made a 'covenant' commitment to each other;
- The priesthood of all believers, because it affirms the place of all Christians in the worship and service of God;
- Church membership and Church Members' Meetings, because in this way we can all take responsibility for the life of the church;
- Interdependence, because we need each other and each church needs other churches;
- Sharing the faith, because we are people of conviction and want others to become part of us;
- Religious freedom, because only free faith is true faith and all should have the freedom to come to their own convictions.

Together these beliefs create a distinctive identity for a Baptist church.

## Leadership in the church<sup>3</sup>



All leaders in a Baptist congregation are there because they have been elected by the members of the church. Ministers are those who have been specially called to their work and extensively trained for it. They are commissioned by being ordained but can only serve any particular congregation because they have been called to do so by the church members. They are teachers of the Christian faith,

pastors of the church and share the faith in the community wherever they can. Together with local leaders who are deacons and (sometimes) elders, they serve the church by leading it in its mission.<sup>4</sup> All of these people seek to be available to help others inside and outside the church.

## A Very Brief History

Christians with Baptist-like beliefs first emerged on the radical end of the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland and Germany in about 1525. They underwent a great deal of persecution. The first English-speaking Baptist church was founded in 1609, among English exiles in Amsterdam, by a former clergyman, John Smyth. The first Baptist congregation on English soil was founded in 1612 in Spitalfields, London by Thomas Helwys. Helwys published, at about the same time, the first appeal in the English language for full religious liberty, for which he was imprisoned. Baptists are now found in most countries of the world with the largest concentration being in the United States of America. Dr Martin Luther King Jr, former President Jimmy Carter and former Vice-President Al Gore (all of them Nobel Prize Winners) are known for their Baptist convictions. Dr Billy Graham, the well-known evangelist, is a Baptist minister. See [http://www.baptist.org.uk/baptist\\_life/baptist\\_history.html](http://www.baptist.org.uk/baptist_life/baptist_history.html) for a time line summary of Baptist history.

## Being connected



Across the world there are an estimated 110 million Baptists, making this the second largest Protestant Christian denomination in the world. In addition there are many others who share Baptist convictions in other denominations. The largest Baptist grouping in the UK is the Baptist Union of Great Britain

(BUGB), but there are also the Baptist Union of Scotland, the Baptist Union of Wales, the Association of Irish Baptist Churches and some other groups. Baptist churches that are members of BUGB usually belong to a Regional Association of churches. Several million people across Europe belong to the European Baptist Federation and many millions globally belong to the Baptist World Alliance. Beyond their own community, Baptists see themselves as very much part of the whole Christian church throughout the world and have many ways of showing their commitment to the universal family of Christians.



## Finally,

In short, to be a Baptist Christian, is to belong to a movement with an honourable history, clear core convictions, a commitment to community and an evangelical, Christian faith that is profoundly committed to freedom. It is a movement with Christ at the centre, with mainstream Christian beliefs but with a radical edge to its commitment. These all constitute good reasons for being part of a Baptist church. Baptists also have a good future to look forward to. By the grace of God, this movement is continuing to thrive and exercise significant influence right across the globe.



For more information, and for details of local Baptist congregations, go to the Baptist Union of Great Britain's website at [www.baptist.org.uk](http://www.baptist.org.uk) where you also will find details of further publications including Baptist Basics. Other websites that will provide more information about the wider Baptist family are:

Baptist Union of Scotland: [www.scottishbaptist.org.uk](http://www.scottishbaptist.org.uk)

Baptist Union of Wales: [www.buw.org.uk](http://www.buw.org.uk)

Association of Irish Baptist Churches: [www.baptistireland.org](http://www.baptistireland.org)

European Baptist Federation: [www.ebf.org](http://www.ebf.org)

Baptist World Alliance: [www.bwanet.org](http://www.bwanet.org)

For more information see:

- <sup>1</sup> Baptist Basics: Believers' Baptism
- <sup>2</sup> Baptist Basics: The Church Members' Meeting
- <sup>3</sup> Baptist Basics: Leadership in the Local Church
- <sup>4</sup> Baptist Basics: Mission and Evangelism

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