

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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The First Baptist Distinctive

Part One: What Is a Distinctive?

Denominational labels are going out of style. I think that is unfortunate, because those labels are a kind of shorthand. They stand for sets of ideas. When a people say that they are Lutherans or Presbyterians, they are not just identifying themselves with an organization or a social group. They are identifying themselves with a combination of ideas. Each of the major denominational labels stands for a set of convictions. Once upon a time, people thought that those ideas were so important that Christians who believed them should be distinguished from other Christians who did not. They wore their label as the badge that identified their distinctive beliefs.

I am a Baptist. Unlike most denominations, Baptists did not choose their own name. Their enemies gave it to them. Nevertheless, the name stood for the ideas that distinguished those Christians who were called Baptists. Because Baptists were strongly committed to their ideas, they accepted the label as a mark of honor. They were pleased to accept a name that stood for important teachings. Because I agree with those teachings, and because I also think they are important, I am happy to share the name.

What I have discovered, however, is that most people who wear the name *Baptist* no longer know that it stands for ideas. If asked to name the characteristic teachings of Baptists,

most modern Baptists merely observe that Baptists perform baptisms by immersing rather than sprinkling or pouring. Average church members exhibit an astonishing lack of knowledge about just what Baptists are supposed to believe.

Sadly, that ignorance is too often shared by people who stand behind the pulpit, and sometimes even by those who teach in Baptist colleges and seminaries. Finding lists of Baptist distinctives is fairly easy, but those lists are often marred by one of two faults. First, many of the lists were compiled by writers who really did not know what Baptists believe. Therefore, these lists often omit important teachings, and sometimes they add teachings about which Baptists have never agreed. Second, and more seriously, some lists have been compiled by people with theological axes to grind. Certain groups would like to claim to be the only true Baptists. To bolster their claim they attempt to define all other Baptists out of existence. Their lists, therefore, amount to propaganda tools.

I would particularly like to correct the first error. The Baptist distinctives taken together are what set Baptists apart from other Christians. Therefore, no belief that is held by all Christians should be named as a Baptist distinctive.

This is an important point, because some teachings set Christians apart from all other religious people. These “Christian distinctives” are known as the *fundamentals*. All true Christians affirm (or at least, refuse to deny) all the fundamentals. Because Baptists are Christians, they also believe the fundamentals. Non-Baptists such as Methodists and Presbyterians also affirm the fundamentals, for they too are Christians. People who deny fundamental doctrines cannot rightly be called *Methodist* or *Presbyterian* any more than they can be called *Baptist*. The fundamentals are the common property of all true Christians, whether Baptist, Lutheran, Calvinist or Wesleyan. Therefore, a fundamental doctrine is not really a Baptist distinctive, even though all Baptists will believe it.

On the other hand, we must not say that *only* Baptists hold *any* of the Baptist distinctives. Baptists are characterized by several beliefs. Not one of those beliefs, however, is absolutely unique to Baptists. No matter which one you choose, you can find other groups that acknowledge it. No single doctrine *by itself* is sufficient to distinguish Baptists from all other groups of Christians.

What makes Baptists different is that they alone hold the *combination* of beliefs that are known as the Baptist distinctives. Each individual belief is held by some other group, but no other group holds the whole bundle. Baptists are distinguished, not by the individual teachings, but by the combination of teachings that make up the Baptist distinctives.

While each of the Baptist distinctives is held by *some* other Christians, no Baptist distinctive is held by *all* other Christians. Therefore, each one of the distinctives sets Baptists apart from *some* other Christian groups. When all of the distinctives are added together, the combination ends up setting Baptists apart from all other Christians.

Many of the pamphlets and books about the Baptist distinctives that have been written over the past fifty years use the same approach. They take the word “BAPTIST” and make it into an acrostic. Each letter of the word “BAPTIST” becomes the first letter of one distinctive. In this scheme, the initial “B” is always made to stand for “Biblical authority.”

Unfortunately, this represents a fairly serious misunderstanding of the first Baptist distinctive. The recognition of biblical authority is not a Baptist distinctive. Let me explain what I do not mean by this, and then let me explain what I do mean.

I do not mean to deny that Baptists affirm the authority of the Bible. They certainly do affirm it! That affirmation, however, does not set Baptists apart from any other Christians. The recognition of Biblical authority is shared by all genuine Christians. It is one of the marks that sets Christians apart from non-Christians. It belongs to a class of ideas that are much more serious than the Baptist distinctives. Biblical authority is a fundamental of the Christian faith.

This means no one who denies the authority of the Bible is really a Christian. Since Baptists are a particular group of Christians, then all true Baptists do indeed acknowledge biblical authority. If they did not, they would be neither Christian nor Baptist. Baptists, however, share this affirmation of biblical authority with other Christian groups. True, historic Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and others also recognize the authority of the Bible. Therefore, even though all real Baptists do acknowledge the authority of the Bible, biblical authority is not properly a Baptist distinctive.

Baptists do affirm a distinctive that seems (at first glance) similar to biblical authority, but the difference is significant once you understand it. The distinction between the two is fairly important, because this particular Baptist distinctive is crucial for several of the others. The genuine distinctive that sets Baptists apart from many other groups of Christians is the absolute authority of the New Testament in all matters of church faith and order.

What does this mean? Simply that Baptists base the doctrine and practice of the church exclusively upon the New Testament. To be sure, this raises certain questions. How is the Baptist distinctive different from a recognition of biblical authority? How do Baptists handle the Old Testament? For that matter, how do they handle the New Testament? How do they stop themselves from becoming Marcionites? All of these questions deserve an answer, and they will be addressed in future essays.

For the moment, I invite you to attempt an experiment. Perhaps your bookshelf holds some manual of Baptist polity or some discussion of the Baptist distinctives. Take it in hand. Look at it. Does it employ the B-A-P-T-I-S-T acrostic? Does it list the first distinctive as "Biblical authority"? Does it fail to mention the absolute authority of the New Testament for church faith and order? Then perhaps you should set it aside and seek an understanding of Baptist principles from some other source. ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Psalm 119 part 5
Isaac Watts (1674 - 1748)

Delight in Scripture; or, The word of God dwelling in us.

ver. 97

O how I love thy holy law!
'Tis daily my delight;
And thence my meditations draw
Divine advice by night.

ver. 148

My waking eyes prevent the day
To meditate thy word;
My soul with longing melts away
To hear thy gospel, Lord.

ver. 3, 13, 54

How doth thy word my heart engage!
How well employ my tongue!
And in my tiresome pilgrimage,
Yields me a heav'nly song.

ver. 19, 103

Am I a stranger or at home,
'Tis my perpetual feast;
Not honey dropping from the comb
So much allures the taste.

ver. 72, 127

No treasures so enrich the mind;
Nor shall thy word be sold
For loads of silver well refined,
Nor heaps of choicest gold.

ver. 28, 49, 175

When nature sinks, and spirits droop,
Thy promises of grace
Are pillars to support my hope,
And there I write thy praise. ✠

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