

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES»

Rediscovering our Baptist identity

What makes Baptists Baptist? **John Tucker** traces the Baptist vision of church and its value for ministry and mission today.

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ome years ago, a Church Life Survey found that among all the Christian traditions in New Zealand, Baptists have the lowest sense of denominational identity. Most people in our churches don't see themselves as Baptists. They don't even know what it means to be Baptist. So what does it mean? And why is it important?

A radical vision of church

The Baptist movement's one great distinctive is its vision of the church. When the Baptist movement began in 1609, the Protestant churches of Europe were state churches to which all citizens were forced to belong, whether or not they were Christians. Resistance could mean imprisonment, torture and even death. The early

A background image showing the backs and shoulders of several people sitting in a church, looking towards the front. The image is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the text overlay.

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Baptists came to the conviction that these churches weren't reformed enough. A true church, they said, is a community of believers who, in response to Christ's call and under his direct rule, freely gather together in covenant relationship with God and each other.

At the heart of this vision is a radical emphasis on "the immediate Lordship of Christ over every individual human person and over every particular gathered church."¹ Christ alone has the right to command the individual conscience, to call people into his church. No one else—not the government, not our parents—can usurp his place by forcing people to believe anything. And Christ alone commands each local church. Final authority over any local church rests not with a bishop or a national council, not even with a senior pastor or a group of elders, but with the risen Christ who promises to be present and make his will known whenever that church gathers together to seek his will (Matthew 18:20).

This is the Baptist vision of the church, and it has profound implications for discipleship, leadership, worship and mission today.

Discipleship

Many Christian traditions believe that discipleship—the process of becoming like Jesus—requires withdrawal from the distractions of community into quietness and solitude. Baptists, however, with their emphasis on the dynamic presence of Christ in the gathered church, believe that sanctification can only occur within the context of a tightly-knit community.

That's one of the reasons why the early Baptists tended to meet in small gatherings of 40 or 50. They believed the gathering should be small enough that its members could truly know one another, and (in their words) "perform all the duties of love one towards another, both to soul and body." But this kind of community, even in smaller groups, never happens by accident. There needs to be a degree of

intentionality. That's why Baptists have often drawn up formal written covenants in which they have solemnly promised to give themselves both to the Lord and to one another "whatsoever it should cost them."

It's this practice of covenanting together that underlies our modern practice of church membership. Unfortunately, membership in most Baptist churches today has become a pathetic parody of what our forebears practised. Becoming a church member today feels more like getting your name on the electoral roll, with a right to vote at church meetings, than giving yourself to a particular group of believers in a costly, counter-cultural commitment.

No wonder most people see little value in becoming church members. No wonder so many of our young adults, longing for authentic Christian community, are leaving our churches. This is a tragedy, because the Baptist vision of church has the potential to generate incredible community. If we want to see people grow as disciples of Christ, and if we want to see our churches grow, it will mean rediscovering something like the Baptist practice of covenanting together.

Leadership

The Baptist vision also has profound implications for leadership and power in the church. Because Christ by his Spirit speaks directly to every believer, every believer in the local church should be involved in discerning Christ's call on that church. And because Christ promises to be present and make his will known whenever his people gather together in his name, the church meeting is the place where we can expect the Spirit to reveal the mind of Christ. The primary locus of authority in any church, therefore, is not the pastor, nor the elders, nor a national gathering of leaders, but the risen Christ in the midst of his people as they gather together in his name.

Yes, the New Testament teaches that Christ gives leaders to the church. Baptists have always recognised this by appointing pastors, elders and deacons, and expecting them to lead. But one of the ways leaders lead is by resourcing church members, and listening to church members, as they gather together in Christ's name.

This vision of congregational government does not have to degenerate into bitter formal debates decided by a majority vote. The church is not a democracy. It's a Christocracy. The goal when we gather together is not to win a vote and impose our will, but to listen to the voice of Christ, and submit to his will. In recent years, however, this dynamic of gathering together

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has been misunderstood, mishandled, and—not surprisingly—mothballed in many Baptist churches.

This is a tragedy, though, because we live at a time when our society is just starting to crave this kind of leadership. *Forbes* magazine recently published an article on leadership entitled “None Of Us Is Smarter Than All Of Us.” This is how it started: “Collaboration has become an essential ingredient for organizational success (perhaps even survival). As organizations move toward more collaborative cultures, a new leadership model is emerging—one that replaces command and control with trust and inclusion. The leader’s role is to encourage team members to see themselves as valued contributors, to help them build their knowledge base, expand their personal networks, and to motivate them to offer their ideas and perspectives in service of a common goal.”² This revolutionary approach to organisational leadership sounds suspiciously to me like historic Baptist leadership!

Worship

The oldest description of Baptist worship that we have dates back to 1609. It records that the worship service began at 8am with a prayer and a Bible reading. This was followed by four or five different church members taking turns to prophesy or preach out of that text. Each sermon ran for about 45 to 60 minutes, with opportunity for interaction and discussion among the congregation. At midday the members shared a meal together and took a collection for

the poor. Then, from 2pm to 6pm, the morning pattern of worship was repeated.

Besides the incredible stamina of these early Baptists, two features stand out. Firstly, notice the incredible attention given to Scripture. For Baptists, the risen Christ communicates to his people supremely through their shared reflection on his Word. Consequently, the preaching of God’s Word has always been a priority. Secondly, notice the broad participation by members. Because Baptists believe that Christ speaks through the members of his body gathered together, they have tended to encourage participation by members in worship beyond just singing.

As I travel around churches, though, the two complaints that I most commonly hear about worship are these: we don’t hear Scripture opened to us, and we don’t hear from one another. Maybe the Baptist vision of church has more prophetic relevance today than we realise.

Mission

Steve Holmes writes that “it is difficult to think of another Christian tradition that has so uniformly seen mission as being so central to its vision of the life of the church.”³ Baptists have been more relentlessly focused on mission than most other traditions. Why?

Again, this can be traced to our vision of the church, with its emphasis on the lordship of Christ over every individual person and every local church. If Christ alone has the right to command the individual conscience, and no one can enter the church without first hearing the call of Christ in the gospel, then evangelism is an absolute imperative. And if final authority over every local church rests with the risen Christ in the midst of his gathered people, and the state’s authority has limits beyond which it must not transgress, then proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom means resisting oppressive social and political systems.

Over the last 400 years, then, Baptists have often been at the forefront of the fight against oppressive social structures. William Carey in India led the campaign to abolish *sati*, or the burning of widows on their husbands’ funeral pyres. William Knibb, the Baptist missionary to Jamaica, played a crucial role in the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire. Martin Luther King Jr, a Baptist minister, directed the campaign for civil rights in the USA. Mission, for Baptists, has meant preaching the gospel of the kingdom both to lost sinners and fallen systems.

Reflecting on this tradition, and the injustice in our world today, Nancy Ammerman says that “it is a great time to be a Baptist. Our cultures need us now more than ever. They need us to speak up for the rights of people it would be easier to put down.”⁴

Does the Baptist vision have any relevance to ministry and mission today? Unquestionably!



Story: John Tucker

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1. **Stephen R. Holmes**, *Baptist Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 161.

2. **Carol Kinsey Goman**, “None Of Us Is Smarter Than All Of Us: Collaborative Leadership From A To Z,” *Forbes*, 1 May 2016, forbes.com/sites/carolkinseygoman/2016/05/01/none-of-us-is-smarter-than-all-of-us-collaborative-leadership-from-a-to-z.

3. **Holmes**, *Baptist Theology*, 142-143.

4. **Nancy Ammerman**, “The Baptist Moment: Twenty-First Century Opportunities,” in *The Gospel in the World: International Baptist Studies*, ed. D. W. Bebbington (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), 340-41.