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Life In Christ

Why are you a baptist? If you were asked this question, could you answer it?
What would you answer?

(Ask for answers)

Years ago in my first interview for my license to minister I was asked this question, but I wasn't really sure how to answer it. God called me here to a baptist church over 10 years ago, this is where I developed my authentic relationship with Jesus, where I heard him call me into ministry, it just felt right. Not really an academic answer with anything specific about the baptist church. It is only through starting to understand the Biblical distinctives of Baptists, that I have come to know why it was different for me here in a baptist church, which grew my relationship with Jesus.

As we are nearing the end of the series on Life in Christ: A New Relationship, taking us along the journey of membership within the baptist church, we have come to the Biblical Distinctives of Baptist.

As a Christian faith we believe in the great doctrines of the Trinity, the virgin birth of Christ, His atonement for sin, His bodily resurrection, salvation by grace through faith and the second coming of Christ. But what distinguishes Baptists from other Christian groups? What are our distinctives?

As I began to study what makes Baptists distinct, I realized I was walking a path many others have walked—people who lived out their Baptist convictions in powerful ways. Let's listen to some of their voices.

William R. Estep (1920–2000)

*A respected Baptist historian of the 20th century, Estep taught at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and was known for linking Baptist origins to the Anabaptist movement in his classic work *The Anabaptist Story*. If he were asked*

why is he a Baptist he might say:

“I am Baptist because I believe faith must be freely chosen. No one can believe for another, and no government or church hierarchy has the right to compel faith. I am Baptist because the church should be a community of the redeemed—those who have personally responded to Christ. The Baptist vision, rooted in the New Testament and carried forward by the Anabaptists, is one of freedom, conscience, and costly discipleship.”

Have you made your faith your own? Not your family’s, not your church’s — but truly your own response to Jesus?

Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968)

African American Baptist pastor, theologian, and civil rights leader; pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta. If he were asked this question he might say:

“I am Baptist because our faith is lived in freedom and rooted in conscience. The Baptist tradition teaches that every person stands equal before God — and that no one should be silenced by the power of another. That’s why we must stand up for justice and peace. The freedom of the soul before God leads to the freedom of all people. My Baptist faith compels me to love God and my neighbour with courage and conviction.”

How does your faith shape how you treat others? Does your faith in Christ move you to seek justice, mercy, and peace where you are?

Lottie Moon (1840–1912)

Southern Baptist missionary to China whose work inspired the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for missions. If she were asked this question she might say:

“I am Baptist because we believe every believer is responsible before God to share the gospel. Baptists taught me that faith must be personal and that obedience to Christ often calls for sacrifice. I am Baptist because we value the worth of each soul and believe the gospel is for every nation. My life in China was simply an extension of that Baptist conviction—that the love of Christ crosses every boundary.”

Where is God calling you to obedience right now? To whom might He be sending you?

Gardner C. Taylor (1918–2015)

Legendary African American Baptist preacher, called “the dean of American preaching.” Pastor of Concord Baptist Church of Christ, Brooklyn. If he were asked this question he might say:

“I am Baptist because we are a people of the Word and the Spirit. We believe the church is not built by wealth or status, but by faith in Jesus Christ. Being Baptist means trusting that God still speaks through ordinary people, still calls sinners to grace, and still builds His kingdom through love. I am Baptist because it is a faith of hope, a faith that gives dignity to the least and strength to the weary.”

Do you believe God can speak and work through you? Through your gifts, your prayers, your voice?

Helen Barrett Montgomery (1861–1934)

Educator, Bible translator, social reformer, and the first woman president of the Northern Baptist Convention (now American Baptist Churches USA). If she were asked this question she might say:

“I am Baptist because we believe in the priesthood of all believers—every Christian, man or woman, young or old, is called to serve God. The Bible is our common ground, and the Holy Spirit our guide. My Baptist faith has given me both freedom and purpose: freedom to interpret Scripture for myself, and purpose to use that freedom to lift others through education, mission, and reform.”

How are you using your freedom in Christ to serve? What’s your ministry in the world right now?

John Lewis (1940–2020)

U.S. Congressman, civil rights leader, and lifelong Baptist layman, ordained as a

minister at age 17.

“I am Baptist because our faith teaches that love is stronger than hate and that peace is more powerful than violence. In the Baptist church I learned that faith must take action. Baptists believe in the freedom of conscience — and that means we must follow the voice of justice even when it costs us. My Baptist faith is what sustained me when I was beaten, jailed, and still called to keep walking.”

What keeps your faith steady when it’s tested? How do you keep walking when following Jesus costs you something?

Valerie Duval-Poujol (b. 1968)

French Baptist theologian, Bible translator, and vice president of the Protestant Federation of France.

“I am Baptist because we hold together freedom and responsibility. We read the Bible for ourselves, yet always in community. In a secular culture, I am Baptist because this faith teaches that Christ alone is Lord — not the state, not the church hierarchy, not tradition. It is a faith of conscience, dialogue, and dignity for all.”

How do you balance personal conviction with listening to others in your faith community? Are you open to what the Spirit might teach you through someone different from you?

Tony Campolo (b. 1935)

American Baptist sociologist, preacher, and activist for justice and reconciliation.

“I am Baptist because I believe in a personal relationship with Jesus that must be lived publicly. Baptists have always said that faith without freedom is dead—but freedom without compassion is empty. To be Baptist is to be part of a community that takes the Bible seriously and calls people to care for the poor, the broken, and the forgotten. My Baptist faith is what moves me to act.”

Where is God calling you to show compassion this week? How is your faith being lived out publicly?

Pearl Goode (1880–1962)

A laywoman and prayer warrior with the Baptist church, known for praying behind the scenes during Billy Graham's early crusades.

“I am Baptist because we believe that prayer is the work of the church. You don't need a title to serve God—only a willing heart. I found in the Baptist way a faith that values every believer's ministry. We each have a place in the kingdom, and mine was to pray. To be Baptist is to live out your calling where God places you.”

Do you believe your prayers make a difference? How might God be calling you to serve quietly but faithfully behind the scenes?

José Míguez Bonino (1924–2012)

He who worked closely with Latin American Baptists and whose liberation theology deeply influenced many Baptist thinkers across South America.

“I am Baptist in spirit because of their insistence on the local church, on freedom of conscience, and on the gospel's call to justice. The Baptist witness reminds us that faith must be free, but never indifferent — it must always seek to liberate the oppressed and uplift the poor.”

Is your faith freeing others? Does it make the world around you more like the kingdom of God?

We can summarize what makes us Baptist in seven key convictions—each one anchored in Scripture.

1. The Bible is our final authority.
2. Every believer is a priest before God.
3. The church is made up of the redeemed.
4. Each soul is free before God.

5. Church and state are separate but both accountable to God.
6. Each local church is under Christ's authority.
7. We practice two symbols of faith — baptism and the Lord's Supper — and we share the Gospel with the world.

Let's briefly look at each one:

Biblical Authority

Conviction: The Bible is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice. We look to Scripture—not human tradition, opinion, or church councils—as our guide for how to live and what to believe.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16–17 “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Priesthood of All Believers

Conviction: Every believer has direct access to God through Jesus Christ. We don't need an earthly mediator or hierarchy to come before God or to serve Him. Each believer is called to ministry.

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Regenerate Church Membership

Conviction: The local church is made up of those who have personally trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Membership is based on personal faith, not family background or tradition.

Scripture: Acts 2:41 “So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.”

Individual Soul Liberty (Freedom of Conscience)

Conviction: Every person has the right and responsibility to respond to God according to the conviction of their own conscience. Faith cannot be forced—it

must be freely chosen.

Scripture: Romans 14:12 “So then, each of us will be accountable to God.”

Separation of Church and State

Conviction: God established both church and government, but they serve different purposes. The state should not control the church, and the church should not wield political power to compel faith.

Scripture: Matthew 22:21 “Then he [Jesus] said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.””

Autonomy of the Local Church

Conviction: Each local church is self-governing under the headship of Christ. No outside body or hierarchy can dictate a church’s beliefs, leadership, or mission.

Scripture: Colossians 1:18 “He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.”

Two Ordinances

Conviction: Baptists observe two symbolic acts commanded by Christ—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—as expressions of faith and obedience. They are reminders of our salvation, not means of earning it.

Scripture: Matthew 28:19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” and Luke 22:19 “Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.””

Evangelism and Missions

Conviction: Baptists believe the Gospel must be shared with all people, both locally and globally. Every believer is called to be a witness for Christ.

Scripture: Acts 1:8 “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come

upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.””

In short, Baptists are people of the Book, the believer, and the mission—rooted in Scripture, redeemed by Christ, and sent by His Spirit.

These aren't just doctrines—they shape how we live together as a community of faith. Life in Christ means a new relationship with God and with one another, lived out in freedom, responsibility, and love.

Paul summarizes all of this in Philippians 2:9–11 “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

That is, the lordship of Christ. Christ is the Sovereign Ruler of the universe, the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. As Dr. R.J. McCracken said, “In all ages Christian discipleship has meant only one thing — the unreserved acceptance of the Lordship of Christ.”

If all the Baptist individuals I mentioned at the beginning spoke together they might say...

from pulpits and protests, classrooms and mission fields, across continents and centuries—being Baptist means living a faith that is free, personal, and active. It means believing that Christ alone is Lord, that every believer has dignity and responsibility, and that the gospel compels both love and justice. To be Baptist, in their shared voice, is to join a global family of believers who seek to live faithfully under the lordship of Christ and to make His freedom known to the world.

Years ago, I may not have thought that I had the right words when they asked me why I was a Baptist, but I knew God called me here.

Now I'd say this: I'm a Baptist because here, I found a community that taught me to follow Jesus freely, to read His Word deeply, and to serve Him boldly.

That's what it means to live a life in Christ.

So what about you? — why are *you* a Baptist?
Is it because you value freedom of conscience?
Because you've found a home where you can serve God with your gifts?
Because you believe Christ is Lord and calls you to follow Him?
Whatever your reason—may it always lead back to Jesus, who alone is our Lord,
King, and our example.