

THE CORE ELEMENTS OF BAPTIST IDENTITY

A PERSONAL RATIONALE

A Personal Position Paper

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## THE DISTINCTIVES OF BAPTIST DISCIPLESHIP

The most important element of any Christian doctrine is the clear articulation of the value placed on God's Word. Do you accept the Lord's indelible stamp of divine inspiration on the men He called out to write its pages? Or, do you find stories and tales that are clearly fictional mixed into the Creator's revelation of Himself to man. Southern Baptists have established their bold position on the inerrancy of the Bible with this meaningful statement.

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy.<sup>1</sup>

The second epistle of Peter provides Scriptural support of this position - "First of all, you should know this: no prophecy of Scripture comes from one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, moved by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God." (2 Pet. 1:20-21).<sup>2</sup> The central and all-encompassing authority of Scripture orchestrates every Baptist distinctive to follow.

The membership of Baptist churches consists of baptized believers in an autonomous local congregation. This environment accentuates the individual's responsibility to submit to Christ Jesus as Lord. Baptist churches are governed with a congregational polity as opposed to an episcopal hierarchy. Therefore, the discipleship of new believers is crucial to a healthy church. This autonomy produces a corporate

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<sup>1</sup>Southern Baptist Convention, *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*

<sup>2</sup>All Scripture references unless otherwise noted are from *The Holman Christian Standard Bible* translation.

responsibility to cultural relevancy, resulting in churches with vibrant ministries and diverse memberships. Inherent to this freedom is the possibility of congregations that become steeped in legalism and myopically focused on the “list of things I must change to be just like you.”

Implied in the issue of autonomy but not specified is the priesthood of the believer. Baptists uphold the Biblical model of access to the throne of God. The laity has the same unhindered access to the Lord as the pastorate. This matter of servanthood is not without sphere to a Baptist. The particular calling and leadership of the pastor are to be acknowledged along with the basic doctrinal elements of Baptist life.

Integral to the distinctives of autonomy and priesthood is the subject of soul competency. The ultimate state of an individual’s relationship with God is between that person and the Lord. Family heritage, church membership, or a general contentment with a person’s balance of good deeds will not insure eternal life. A personal submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ is required to join the family of believers. Soul competency is the driving force behind the constant battle for religious freedom. Secular authorities cannot force belief or, particularly, unbelief.

The ordinances of a Baptist are minimal in comparison to episcopal religions. However, believer’s baptism by immersion, and the Lord’s Supper as a symbolic act of obedience create a striking contrast to episcopal ritual. The celebration of baptism is only extended to a person who believes; Jesus died for the atonement of their sins, and has submitted to the Lordship of Christ. As a testimony to the believer’s faith they are fully immersed in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Baptism is an act of obedience, and celebrated to symbolize the believer’s understanding and

acceptance of a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour. Baptism is a celebration and confession of the believer's faithful decision and therefore is not a means of salvation in itself. Since an infant cannot understand this act of obedience to Christ, infant baptisms are not performed. As an ordinance of the church, baptism is a prerequisite to church membership and the Lord's Supper. Baptists also differ with episcopal ritual regarding the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is a symbolic partaking of the bread and the wine to commemorate the ultimate sacrifice of Christ Jesus for the atonement of our sins, and celebrated in anticipation of His second coming.

These beliefs and ordinances are the core of Baptist discipleship, creating a divine atmosphere where the Holy Spirit can swell the heart of an evangelical Baptist and change the world through the overflow.

### SAVED BY GRACE - SOUTHERN BAPTIST BY CHOICE

The divine moment of my salvation came at thirty-three. I became a believer only after an exhaustive analytic process. I look back on that endeavor as both confirmation and procrastination. To accurately answer the question of why I am a Southern Baptist requires a review of three elements of the final decision, the emotional, the intellectual, and the spiritual, aspects of my conversion and call to the ministry.

#### **Emotional**

My Southern Baptist wife was not the first person to introduce the importance of salvation, but she did have the most impact. Sometimes I wish she had been more insistent, although I probably wouldn't have viewed her boldness favorably at the time. She would leave for church on Wednesdays and Sundays, with our two daughters, and I

would stay home or go back to work. I told her in a protective tone, “I’ll go to church if you or the girls are singing, or something, but don’t expect me to get anything out of the message.” She waited and prayed, along with the congregation of Bookcliff Baptist Church, for six years.

Another key disciple, and member of Bookcliff, was Alice’s father. Reuben was diagnosed with a very aggressive cancer. I spent a lot of time with this truly godly man. I watched how he handled disappointment, frustration, severe pain, and the inevitable separation from his beloved. I was broken by the one thing he didn't experience... fear. I could clearly see Jesus in Papa Reub's eyes. I also watched a body of believers lovingly care for one of their own. I walked down the isle where Pastor John Robbins was waiting. There was great relief when the only remaining lost sheep in Reuben Lambert's family finally acknowledged the Shepherd. It is not lost on me that my salvation came at an especially high price. It wasn't many hours after I told Reuben I was saved that he went to walk the streets of gold. That Southern Baptist church blessed me with many opportunities to succeed, and more importantly, fail in ministry. So one of the reasons I’m a Southern Baptist is because “Ya dance wit da one what brung ya.”

### **Intellectual**

Christianity is about change and transformation. If you are to be true to God’s calling on your life, you must enter into an environment that allows and encourages you to evaluate and orchestrate that change. The world would have us believe that to become an evangelistic Christian is to take a vow of intellectual retreat. Although it happens,

nothing could be farther from the truth. The supernatural combination of Scripture and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the key to attaining great wisdom and knowledge.

Many denominations present worship and discipleship opportunities that are strictly confined to the intellectual aspects of the faith. There is a growing “spiritual community” that has dismissed all the supernatural power of God, even going so far as to argue that Christ’s resurrection was symbolic.

I believe in a literal six-day creation. I believe the ten plagues were supernatural and cannot be explained away by a volcano. I believe that Peter walked on water. And I believe in the bodily resurrection of my Saviour Jesus Christ. So, I must find an environment where God can orchestrate His changes in my life. The Southern Baptist’s emphasis on Spirit-led Christian education provides that pursuit.

### **Spiritual**

The Lord has called me to work with troubled churches to renew their vision of the local mission field. That task requires a divine balance between relevance and reverence. Scriptural authority, the autonomy of the local church, and a rich Baptist history gives me the firm footing I need to “speak the truth in love” to the plateaued and declining churches in the kingdom of God.