

Why I Am a Baptist

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The Church

The Baptist belief and emphasis concerning the New Testament church is one of the distinctives which differentiates them from other denominations.

What is a New Testament church?

A definition which probably is accepted by the majority of Baptists was set forth in the Statement of Faith adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in **1963**. That Statement says: "A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a local body of baptized believers who are associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the two ordinances of Christ, committed to his teaching, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. This church is an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a congregation, members are equally responsible. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.

The New Testament speaks also of the church as the body of Christ which includes all the redeemed of all ages."

1. This statement places its emphasis upon the church as "a local body of baptized believers," but states that there also is a secondary meaning. Let us consider the Baptist position concerning the church as revealed in this statement.

1) Baptists emphasize the church as a local body of baptized believers because this is the emphasis which is found in the New Testament. The Greek word *ekklesia*, translated "church" in the English Bible, is "used in the New Testament 114 times. Three times there clearly is no reference to the church. Eighty-five times the local idea is positively certain." In a number of other cases the reference clearly is generic or general, referring to the church as an institution. Three references appear to

be speaking of an *ekklesia* in heaven, when all of the saved are together. There are references in ten verses in Ephesians and Colossians, where the apostle seems to be thinking of something other than the local church. It is largely from these that the larger or "universal" (theological term; not found in the Bible with reference to the church) concept of the church as the body of Christ made up of all the redeemed comes. However, many Baptist scholars interpret these passages as having the generic or institution meaning. Both Dr. B. H. Carroll and Dr. George W. McDaniel so classify them. Whatever may be one's interpretation, however, he must admit that in New Testament usage the primary emphasis is upon the "local" church.

This same emphasis is found in Jesus' use of the word. He spoke of the church twenty-three times, three in Matthew and nineteen in the book of Revelation. In every case except the first one, Matthew 16:18, he clearly is speaking of a "local" church. Matthew 16:18 is his declaration "Upon this rock I will build my church." Since every other reference is to the church as a local body, it seems reasonable to assume that Jesus had the same meaning here, except in an institutional sense. Nowhere did Jesus say that he would establish two kinds of churches, a local one and a universal one. It is because of the New Testament usage that Baptists give emphasis to the church as a local body.

2) This church is to be made up of baptized believers. First, they must be "believers," by which Baptists mean that they must have been saved or born again. Unsaved persons may become members of Baptist churches, but they do so through a

false or mistaken profession of faith. Second, these believers must be baptized, by which the Baptist mean immersed. A New Testament church is, in Baptist thinking, a local, visible body made up of baptized believers. This is what is sometimes referred to as “a regenerate church membership.” This belief immediately eliminates both infant baptism and any other type of church-related salvation.

- 3) In Baptist belief and practice these churches are made up baptized believers “associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the ordinances, committed to his teaching, exercising the gifts, rights and privileges invested in them by his word....” Here is a congregation of believers, worshiping together, working together, and, together seeding to do the Lord’s will in all things.
- 4) Each church is an autonomous body, completely independent, and in democratic manner, administering its affairs under the headship of Jesus Christ. Baptists find in the New Testament no evidence of hierarchical or other type of outside control over the churches. New Testament churches elected deacons, sent out missionaries, exercised discipline, and carried on their work as a congregation. Baptists believe that they should have the same autonomy today. Cooperation with larger bodies such as associations or conventions, is entirely on a voluntary basis, and every Baptist church always is independent.
- 5) In Baptist thinking, the church is the agency for carrying out Christ’s commission to make disciples, baptize them, and teach them to observe all things which he had commanded. The church may do this independently, or it may cooperate with other churches of like faith and order in associations and

conventions, in an enlarged program of witness. Most Baptist churches choose to work in such denominational relationships, and the vast mission, educational, and benevolent programs being carried on by various Baptist groups today, are made possible through this voluntary cooperation of independent churches.

Baptist churches also usually cooperate with churches of other denominations in kingdom affairs, so long as that cooperation does not call for a sacrifice of doctrinal integrity or autonomy. In many areas such as morals, community uplift, social action, and others, Baptists always have worked with other groups. While some Baptists participate in the modern “ecumenical movements” feeling that there should be a Baptist voice in them, most Baptists have maintained a position apart from them, probably feeling with Dr. W. A. Criswell that “Ecumenicity is another name for death for our Baptist faith.” Baptists so cherish their New Testament principles and their independence that they never are willing to relinquish them for mere outward unity. At the same time they count every person who accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior as a brother, and always are ready to walk with him in kingdom affairs and fellowship, when no compromise is demanded or required.

Here then, is the New Testament church, as Baptists see it, believe concerning it, and emphasize it. It is a local body of baptized believers, seeking to carry out Christ’s will here on the earth.

2. The Statement of Faith reveals that Baptists acknowledge that “The New Testament speaks also of the church as the body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all ages.” **It is interesting to note the change in Baptist emphasis in recent years,**

pointed up by the fact that this statement was not in the Statement of Faith adopted by Southern Baptists in 1925. There are two points of view concerning the meaning of this statement.

- 1) To some Baptists it apparently means much the same that is meant by other denominations when they speak of the “body” of Christ, or of a “universal, invisible church.” They believe that there is in existence now a “body” called the church, made up of all the saved on the earth, and that it is entered by the new birth. Those holding this position believe that “local” churches are simply visible manifestations of the larger body.
- 2) There are other **Baptists who deny that there is actually a “universal, invisible church” in existence now**, although probably most of them would agree that when all of the saved are together in heaven they will make one great “church” or assembly. They contend that there is nothing in the New Testament about people being “born again” into the church, and that proponents of this position are confusing it with the kingdom. They

call attention to the fact that the words “universal” and “invisible” are never used concerning the church in the New Testament, and that the New Testament church always is an assembled or gathered group. A “universal” church could be only an ideal, since its membership could be known only to God, since it can have no meetings, no officers, and no program, and since it can be an actuality only when all of the redeemed are together in heaven. If someone argues that this breaks fellowship with all Christians other than Baptists, it is answered, “Not at all. They are in the kingdom, can be in local churches, and will be part of the true “universal” assembly gathered in glory. Here on earth, however, the church is local and visible.”

Thus Baptists disagree concerning the meaning of church being something larger than a local, visible body, but they are generally agreed that the primary New Testament emphasis is on the local church, and it is to that body which they give their major attention.

— *Why I Am A Baptist*, Joe Odle, Broadman Press, 1972, pp. 100-104