



Baptist Principles

The Baptist World Alliance (BWA) estimates that there are about 160,000 local Baptist churches around the world in more than 130 countries.

These churches belong to more than 200 different conventions, federations, fellowships and unions. It's exciting to be part of such a large, vibrant and growing Baptist community! If you feel that your church is small and struggling, take heart! There are Baptist Christians around the world praying for you and who want to support and encourage you.

What does it mean to be Baptist?

When we compare various Baptist churches, one thing becomes clear: we Baptists are often quite different from one another. This is also true when we study our heritage. Churches at different times and in different places have had varying emphases as they have sought to be faithful to what the Lord Jesus Christ has called them to be and do. This diversity can be tremendously enriching.

Given this diversity, most Baptist Christians have held foundational principles in common. Understanding these, and living them out as churches, is both exciting and challenging. What are these core values?

This leaflet sets out ten values (rather than 10 Commandments!) that may be of help. How do you respond to these principles? Are there any others that you would add? What has been important to you in your particular context? May God be with you as you read this leaflet, reflect upon its message, and pray through how God is calling you to serve Him.

Baptists are a People Who . . .

Are Christians (Acts 11:26) This is absolutely central! Baptists are not a cult or sect; they are part of the worldwide Christian church. We believe in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we seek to follow Jesus Christ as Lord.

Honor the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16) Baptists at their best have always held the Bible to be God's word. We believe God speaks to us today through this ancient, yet ever-living, word. Baptists have consequently sought to have their beliefs and practices shaped by what God has revealed through the Scriptures.

Commit to Believers' Baptism (Romans 6:3-4) This principle distinguishes Baptists from a number of other branches of the Christian church. Baptists hold that the New Testament pattern for baptism is for those who have come to *believe*. This is usually done by immersion, when the new convert goes completely under the water in the act of being baptized. Richly symbolic when administered in this way, baptism speaks of how new Christians have had their sins "washed away" by the Lord Jesus. Believers' baptism by immersion also shows how we are buried with Christ (going under the water is a bit like a burial) and given new life in him (symbolized as we come up out of the water). So, a vital mark of belonging to the Baptist family is a commitment to believers' baptism.

Cherish Freedom (John 8:36) Historically, Baptists have sometimes been persecuted for their faith and, sadly, this still happens in many places around the world. If you are unable to worship and witness freely, then there are other churches in the BWA who are praying for you. We support the freedom of others to worship and practice their faith in peace (even when we might sharply disagree with them) or, indeed, not to worship at all. We want to commend Christ to all persons but want to coerce no-one.

Believe in the Local Church (I Peter 2:5) Baptists also believe in freedom in another sense - the freedom of each local congregation, meeting together under Christ as Lord, to discern how to order their life together. For Baptists, the local church is made up of believers who have committed themselves to God and to one another.

In some Baptist churches the pastor or elders may, in practice, make a lot of the decisions themselves. In many other churches, the whole membership will meet from time to time "to discern the mind of Christ", and important decisions will be taken together. Such churches still believe in leadership and clear pastoral oversight, but they recognize that God often speaks through ordinary church members. This form of church government gives great dignity and respect to all who have come together as part of a local church. It can also lead to very radical and exciting decisions as God speaks to the church and leads it forward.

Associate with One Another (Ephesians 6:24) Although Baptist congregations are, in one sense, independent, Baptists have always been at their strongest when they have "associated" with one another beyond the local congregation. Some Baptists speak of "interdependence" alongside independence. We are stronger together

than apart. Supporting each other and relating together for discernment and action are vital. When this does not happen local churches are impoverished.

Work for Social Justice (Micah 6:8) Baptists have historically been ready to speak out against injustice. They have not just wanted to speak but to live “prophetically” too. The great Baptist figure Martin Luther King, Jr. embodies this core value.

Love Mission (Matthew 28:19-20) Mission is at the heart of what it means to be a Baptist. For much of their history, Baptists have been committed to cross-cultural mission, seeking to reach countries and cultures other than their own with the gospel message. Baptist missionaries such as the Englishman, William Carey, who went to India, began this work in 1792. Today Baptists in countries all over the world send workers to other nations in order to share Christ.

Baptists are also committed to mission in their own local communities. A very high priority is given to evangelism. Baptists want all men and women to hear the wonderful good news of personal salvation in and through Jesus Christ and to respond in faith. Baptists also work for the social betterment of their communities. Recently, environmental issues have become increasingly important for many Baptists.

Live Sacrificially (Romans 12:1) Baptists have often been ready to sacrifice all for Christ. They know that the Lord Jesus gives grace day by day and, ultimately, the “reward” of heaven.

Know Where They've Been and Where They're Going . . . Baptists have a wonderful heritage! We want to encourage you to be faithful to these core convictions. Baptist identity today depends upon exploring the richness of the Baptist heritage and interpreting it anew with the present generation.

This leaflet has been prepared by the Reverend Peter Morden, Tutor of Spurgeon's College, London, and member of the BWA History and Heritage Commission. Please visit our website to let us know what you think.

For a copy of the Baptist Story for children, and a coloring book to download, please visit www.bwa-baptist-heritage.org. We would love to hear from you.