

Baptist Principles

Draft text for BWA HIC leaflet 2007

The Baptist World Alliance (BWA) estimates that there about 160,000 local Baptist churches around the world in more than 130 countries. These churches belong to over 200 different conventions and unions.

It's exciting to be part of such a large, vibrant and growing Baptist community! Especially if you feel that your church is small and struggling, take heart! There are Baptist Christians around the world who are praying for you and who want to support and encourage you.

What does it mean to be a Baptist?

When we compare various Baptist churches, one of the things that becomes clear is that they are often quite different from one another. This is also true when we look at our heritage. Churches at different times and in different places have had different emphases as they have sought to be faithful to what the Lord Jesus has been calling them to be and do. This diversity, rather than something to be afraid of, can, in fact, be tremendously enriching.

But as well as this diversity, there have also been principles that most people who have called themselves Baptist Christians have held in common. Understanding these, and living them out as churches, is both exciting and challenging. What are these core values?

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

Baptists are. . .

A Christian People

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.

A Bible People

Baptists at their best have always held the Bible to be God's word. We believe God speaks to us today through his ancient, yet ever living, word. Baptists have consequently sought to have their beliefs and practices shaped by what God has revealed through the Scriptures.

A People Who Are Committed to Believer's Baptism

This is a distinctive that marks Baptists out from a number of other branches of the Christian church. Baptists hold that the New Testament pattern for baptism is to baptize those who have come to *believe*. This is usually done by immersion - the new convert goes completely under the water in the act of being baptized. This is richly symbolic. Administered in this way, baptism speaks of how new Christians have had their sins “washed away” by the Lord Jesus. Also, believer's baptism by immersion “sets forth” how we are buried with Christ (going under the water is 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 believer's baptism.

A People Who Believe in Freedom

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 meet without fear and in freedom, then there are other churches in the BWA who are praying for you. We also support the freedom of others to worship and practice their faith in peace (even when we might sharply disagree with them).

A People Who Believe in the Local Church

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.

But in many 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 do not believe in leadership or in 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 and can also lead to very radical and exciting decisions as God speaks to the church and leads it forward.

A People Who Believe in Associating with One Another

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.

A Prophetic People

Baptists have historically been ready to speak out on issues of injustice. They have not just wanted to speak but to live “prophetically” too--with values different than the world around. A great Baptist figure such as Martin Luther King, Jr. embodies this core value.

A Missionary People

Mission is at the absolute 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 the eighteenth century. Today Baptists in countries like Korea send workers around the world to share Christ.

But Baptists are also committed to mission in their own local communities. Baptists engage in all sorts of projects for the social betterment of their communities while also giving a high priority 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.

A Sacrificial People

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.

A People Who Know Where They've Come From And Where They're Going

Baptists know who they are because they know who they were. Put another way, Baptist identity depends upon exploring the richness of the Baptist heritage and interpreting it anew for the present age.

May God be with you as *you* play your part in doing this!

How has God challenged you through this leaflet? It has been prepared under the supervision of the History and Heritage Commission of the Baptist World Alliance. You can visit our website and let us know what you think. We would love to hear from you.

Some explanatory notes from the author of the tentative text:

1. Obviously, this is text only. I believe it would be important to integrate pictures and graphics into the writing, to break up the look of it and add interest. I would assume we wouldn't present this as two sides of A4, but would reformat everything into a leaflet style.

2. You will notice I haven't referred to many figures from Baptist history or examples of specific situations from our heritage! This might appear to be a serious omission in a leaflet on Baptist principles and probably is!

My concern has been twofold. **Firstly**, I have wanted to try and keep down the overall length. **Secondly**, as I thought about our heritage I realized afresh the extent to which my examples have a very strong western bias. I think that if the commission wanted more directly historical material, it would be better for us to decide what examples of “Baptist principles in action” we were going to include when we meet together a group (alternatively, perhaps a subgroup could work on this). That way, we would get a much better spread of examples.

3. I have tried to write in a “non-academic” way for a general audience. Accordingly I have attempted to keep the language simple but, reading the leaflet through once again, I am conscious of a number of times where I've failed.