

The issue of slavery peaked in 1845 when the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (founded in 1814) determined it could not appoint candidates for service who held slaves and when the American Baptist Home Mission Society (founded in 1832) decided separate northern and southern conventions were necessary. The Southern Baptist Convention was formed in response.

Northern Baptists remained organized as a group of societies until 1907, when the Northern Baptist Convention was formed to structure coordination of the societies' work while maintaining the autonomy of constituent churches. The Northern Baptist Convention was renamed the American Baptist Convention in 1950. In 1972, its name was changed to American Baptist Churches USA.

Today, American Baptist Churches USA numbers about 5,700 congregations and 1.5 million members. We rank sixth in size among the Baptist bodies; however, we are by far the most diverse. American Baptists have no racial majority – this astounding fact truly sets us apart from other denominations. This devoted, loving community doesn't always agree – but it is always in fellowship working on relationships. In fact, many church leaders outside our denomination say that we have been influential far beyond our numbers through our leadership in advocating for social justice, equality and concern for the poor.

Sources: "The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms" by Dr. Walter B. Shurden, pgs. 4-5, Smyth & Helwys, 1993; "Baptist Ways: A History" by Bill J. Leonard, pgs. 422-425, Judson Press, 2003; American Baptist Historical Society; "A History of the Baptists" by Robert G. Torbet, Judson Press, 1950; and "Down by the Riverside: A Brief History of Baptist Faith" by Everett Goodwin, Judson Press, 2002.

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...With *Liberty*

Our **liberties** define us like nothing else.
To compromise them would be to lose
our distinctive gift.

We are liberty-loving people.

We believe in...

Religious liberty

Baptists were among the leaders in Colonial America fighting for the separation of church and state.

Church liberty

Each congregation is the highest expression of the church.

Scriptural liberty

Each believer is given the liberty of interpreting scripture under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Priestly liberty

Pastors and laity are neither over the other but all are called to ministry.

Soul liberty

Each person is given the responsibility and freedom to shape his or her own faith.

...and *Justice*



Martin Luther King, Jr. was an American Baptist pastor whose fight for freedom and **justice** earned a Nobel Peace Prize — he's honored as one of the greatest Americans ever.

"Every Baptist liberty can be undermined by irresponsibility. No liberty gives one license to act without boundaries. Freedom demands individual and collective responsibility." — Walter Shurden

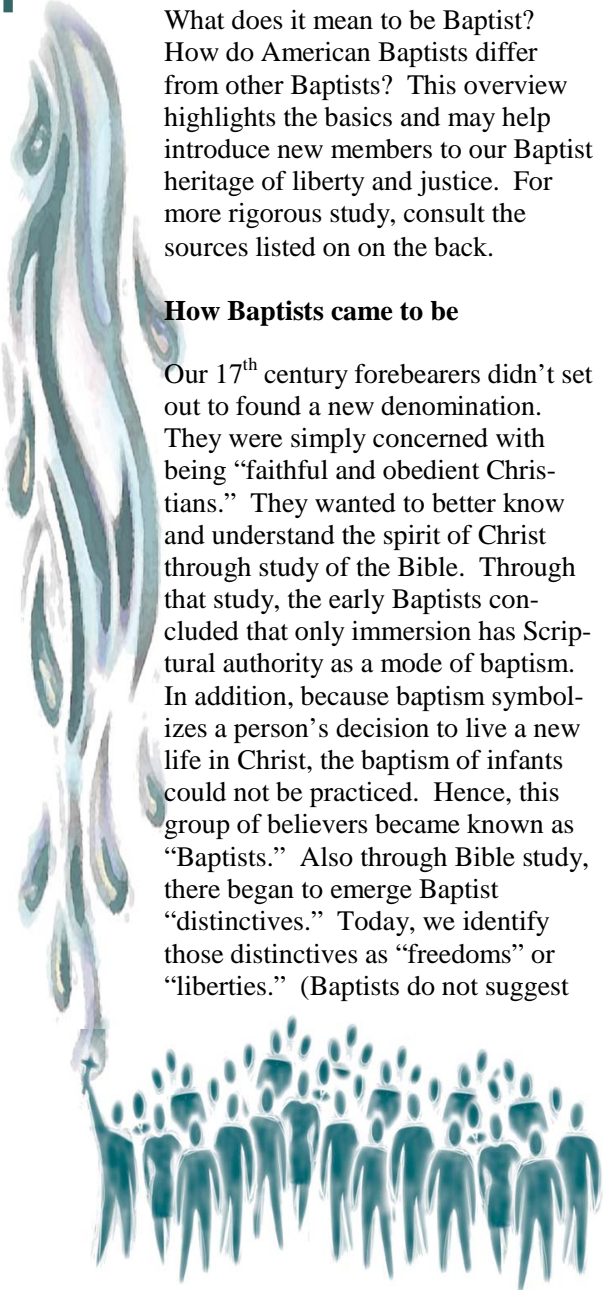


— And —



An American
Baptist Tradition

Celebrating Our Distinctive Baptist Heritage



What does it mean to be Baptist? How do American Baptists differ from other Baptists? This overview highlights the basics and may help introduce new members to our Baptist heritage of liberty and justice. For more rigorous study, consult the sources listed on the back.

How Baptists came to be

Our 17th century forebearers didn't set out to found a new denomination. They were simply concerned with being "faithful and obedient Christians." They wanted to better know and understand the spirit of Christ through study of the Bible. Through that study, the early Baptists concluded that only immersion has Scriptural authority as a mode of baptism. In addition, because baptism symbolizes a person's decision to live a new life in Christ, the baptism of infants could not be practiced. Hence, this group of believers became known as "Baptists." Also through Bible study, there began to emerge Baptist "distinctives." Today, we identify those distinctives as "freedoms" or "liberties." (Baptists do not suggest

that they are the only Christians who adhere to one or more of these four liberties.)

Even in the early days, there was no unity among Baptists. In 17th century England, two distinct theological groups emerged: General Baptists and Particular Baptists. General Baptists believed in free will and "falling from grace," and Particular Baptists believed in predestination and "once saved, always saved." Beyond those fundamental theological differences, Baptists continued to define and refine their beliefs. By the 20th century, there numbered six major Baptist denominations (and a dozen or so smaller ones) in the U.S. So different were they in outlook and approach that Martin Luther King, Jr., the most famous leader of the American Civil Rights Movement, was a Baptist; as was Georgia Governor Lester Maddox, who chased blacks out of his restaurant, some at the point of a gun.

Through the centuries, however, Baptist focus on liberties remained intact. These liberties give each Baptist the ability to establish a relationship with Christ in the way each believes the Holy Spirit is leading. No minister, no elder, no council nor convention can usurp the primacy of Christ's authority in our lives. These liberties, however, lead to diversity of thought and action, and, to that end, much division and controversy.

What are the five distinctive liberties?

Bible Liberty: Under the Lordship of Christ, the Bible must be central in the life of the individual and church and that Christians, with the best and most scholarly tools of inquiry, are both free and obligated to study and obey the Scripture.

Soul Liberty: Baptists believe in the inalienable right and responsibility of every person to deal with God without the imposition of creed, the interference of clergy, or the intervention of civil government.

Church Liberty: Local churches are free, under the Lordship of Christ, to determine their membership and leadership, to order their worship and work, to ordain whom they perceive as gifted for ministry, male or female; and to participate in the larger Body of Christ, of whose unity and mission Baptists are proudly a part.

Priestly Liberty: Because all Christians are priests before God, Baptists believe that no pastor has official or constituted authority to "rule over" anybody. As such, all Christians have the liberty and the responsibility to minister in the name of Christ.

Religious Liberty: Baptists believe in religious liberty for themselves. But they believe in it equally for all people. While Baptists have no sympathy for atheism or agnosticism or materialism, they uphold the freedom of atheists, agnostics and materialists in their convictions.

Who are American Baptists?

This is a true story. *One Sunday, an American Baptist on vacation attended a small interdenominational church on a Florida island. The presiding pastor that day was a Presbyterian. When the member introduced herself as an American Baptist, the Presbyterian replied: "Ah, you are a true Baptist." A quick look at our history supports that statement.*

American Baptists, of course, like all Baptists trace their roots back to the early 17th century (as outlined above). Because of continuing intolerance by Puritans in New England, Baptist activity developed in New Jersey and Philadelphia. In 1707 the Philadelphia Baptist Association formed, comprised of five congregations in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. By 1790 there were 35 Baptist associations, and about 560 ministers, 750 churches and 60,000 members in the U.S.