**Baptist distinctives**

**What makes Baptists Baptist? John Tucker gives us a quick overview of Baptist distinctives and why they are important in God’s mission.**

Today there are more than 100 varietiesof Baptist churches around the world. In New Zealand, the Baptist Union contains nearly 240 Baptist churches and fellowships, with a total weekly attendance of nearly 33,000. There is huge diversity among these churches, and all of them are Baptist. So what unites all these diverse churches and believers together?

Theologians and church leaders usually offer lists of distinctive Baptist convictions, such as:

* authority of Scriptures
* freedom of conscience
* priesthood of all believers
* congregational government
* autonomy of local church
* believers’ baptism
* church membership for the regenerate.

The only problem with this kind of list is that none of these convictions are unique to Baptists.

**A little history**

When the Baptist movement began in 1609, Europe’s churches were basically all state churches. For example, everyone born in England belonged to the Church of England, whether or not they were a Christian. But the early Baptists believed the true church was a community of believers who freely gathered together in response to Christ’s call and under his direct rule.

And while the Protestant Reformers believed that, in Jesus’ death and resurrection, God had made a covenant with humanity, Baptists went further. They argued that participating in God’s eternal covenant of grace also meant entering into a mutual covenant relationship with other believers in a local church.

This is what distinguishes us as Baptists: the conviction that we most fully experience and embody the liberating rule of the risen Christ when we bind ourselves to others in a local covenanting community.

**The biblical basis**

In the Old Testament, God entered a covenant with the twelve tribes of Israel. He chose them to be his own people, but that covenant had a horizontal dimension. As the law made clear, they had to treat each other with the same kind of love and faithfulness that God had showed them.

You see this same pattern in the New Testament. Jesus’ primary command to his disciples was, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). In Acts 2 Luke describes how the first Christians in Jerusalem shared their property, possessions, homes and lives. Their faith in Christ was expressed through a deep commitment to a local body of believers.

This horizontal dimension is also inherent in the biblical sacraments. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 that we were baptised by one Spirit into one body. For Paul, and for the early Baptists, being immersed in water symbolised your inclusion in a covenant community. In this community, people were knitted together like the different parts of a human body, committed to sharing their lives with one another. Consequently, we are not being true to our roots or to Scripture if we baptise people without also bringing them into membership, or, for that matter, if we welcome people into membership who have not first expressed their faith in Jesus through baptism.

If baptism marked entry into the new covenant, Communion affirmed your participation in it. When Jesus established the Lord’s Supper, he said, “This is my blood of the *covenant*” (Mark 14:24). In the Jewish context of a Passover meal, a covenant implied a covenant people. Jesus, in establishing a new covenant, was reconstituting the people of the kingdom. The Lord’s Supper was never intended to be a private rite. It is a fellowship meal—an expression of commitment to those with whom you eat.

This covenantal understanding of the church profoundly shaped the way our Baptist forebears related to one another. But what of Baptists today? Let’s look at some key markers of Baptist distinctives.

**Membership**

A friend of mine told me about his adult son who loves Jesus and wants to serve his kingdom, but who has stopped going to church. Having been part of an intentional missional community for a few years, this young man has a taste for authentic, committed Christian community. But he doesn’t find it in his parents’ (Baptist) church.

This is a tragedy because the Baptist vision of church has the potential to generate an incredible community. But there needs to be a degree of intentionality. That’s why, from the 17th century, Baptist churches commonly drew up written covenants in which church members solemnly promised to “give [themselves] to the Lord and to one another…whatsoever it should cost them.”

This practice of covenanting together underlies our modern Baptist practice of church membership. But membership in most Baptist churches today is a pathetic parody of covenant membership as our forebears practised it. Today it is like getting your name on the electoral roll; it gives you the right to vote in church members’ meetings. No wonder most people see little value in becoming a member of the church!

**Discipleship**

With their emphasis on the presence of Christ in a covenanting community, Baptists believe that discipleship can only occur within the context of a tightly-knit community. The early Baptists tended to meet in small gatherings of 40 or 50. They believed the gathering should be small enough that its members could truly know one another, and (in their words) “perform all the duties of love one towards another, both to soul and body.”

Want to get to know Jesus better? Then, as Timothy Keller writes, it is necessary to “be deeply involved in the church, in Christian community, with strong relationships of love and accountability. Only if you are part of a community of believers seeking to resemble, serve, and love Jesus will you ever get to know him and grow into his likeness.”1

**Leadership**

In a Baptist church, final authority rests not with the senior pastor or a group of elders, but with the risen Christ, who promises to be present and to lead his people when they gather together to pray and listen to his word in Scripture. This understanding of leadership is rooted in Jesus’ promise in Matthew 18:20, where he says “[whenever] two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

Yes, it is true that the New Testament also teaches that Christ gives leaders to his church (Heb. 13:17). Baptists have recognised that fact from the get-go, and have appointed elders and deacons. But, while leaders must lead, they must also listen to the community gathered in church meetings.

Since the 1970s many New Zealand Baptist churches have modelled their leadership structures on the corporate world. According to this paradigm, the pastor is the CEO, the elders are the board, and the members of the church are shareholders. Church meetings have also adopted a business-like format, with less prayer, worship and Scripture reading, and more debates, points of order and amendments. As a result, participation is often limited to a small group who have an official role or who feel confident and competent to speak in a formal public setting (often those who are culturally privileged and/or theologically trained).

Baptist churches did not begin to use voting until the early 19th century. Over time, the practice of subjecting decisions to a majority vote has tended to produce meetings marred by power blocs and bitter debates. But the church is not a democracy; it is a Christocracy. The goal when we gather together is not to win a vote and impose our will, but to listen together to the voice of Christ, and seek his will.

In recent years this dynamic of gathering together to discern the mind of Christ through Scripture has been seriously eroded. That’s a tragedy, both for practical and theological reasons. We all suffer if we don’t actively promote those voices that tend to be marginalised in our communities.

**Commitment that costs**

How do we recover the Baptist vision of church membership as a costly counter-cultural commitment to a particular body of believers? Here are some suggestions:

* Compose a church covenant together, capturing the commitments you believe Christ is calling you to make.
* Restructure your discipleship processes around long-term local neighbourhood groups where people can really get to know one another.
* Reimagine worship to include opportunities for small group discussion and feedback.
* Reconfigure church meetings so as to promote and listen to voices that are hardly ever heard.

We live in a society where families and communities have broken down. In this context, one of the most powerful missional strategies we can adopt is simply to recapture the Baptist vision of church as a tightly-knit covenant community.

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**References:**

# Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, …, 143.

**Take outs**

1. What would be your greatest challenge in committing yourself to a group of people in costly, covenant love?
2. If your church became a covenant community, what difference might it make to mission in your neighbourhood? (See Acts 2:46-47.)