

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES
Binkley Baptist Church
James L. Pike

What makes us free to be who we are at Binkley Church? We are a “Baptist” church, founded 44 years ago to be an inclusive, interracial, socially concerned, open membership, and community of faith. Why can Binkley be who it is while other Baptist churches appear to have an almost opposite “mission” and understanding of their calling and still be “Baptist?” Why is one Baptist church open and welcoming while another has closed communion and does not honor former baptism even from another Baptist congregation? How is it possible for one Baptist to believe in the death penalty and another to believe that by every New Testament standard it is wrong? How can they still be Baptists?

The answer to these and other questions is found in understanding the basic Baptist Distinctives. These are not “creeds” which say what we believe, but guidelines to show how individual belief is freely determined. The umbrella word above all Baptist Distinctives is “RELIGIOUS FREEDOM.” You cannot understand the Baptist heritage without accepting that religious freedom is underneath and over it all.

As background for this session on Baptist Distinctives and Religious Liberty, we share a letter found in a marvelous collection of “Letters of a Nation,” edited by Andrew Carroll to the Town of Providence, in Rhode Island Colony, from Roger Williams.

(BACKGROUND) Although many of the first pilgrims were exceedingly intolerant of faiths different from their own, one of the earliest settlers, Roger Williams, actually subscribed to the idea of religious freedom. Williams was banished from the Massachusetts Bay by the revered minister John Cotton, Sr. for suggesting that there be a separation of civil and religious authority and that they break from the Church of England. Moving to Rhode Island, Williams ultimately created a sanctuary for people of varying faiths, including Jews. In the early to mid-1650s, the citizens of Providence found themselves in a quarrel as to whether it was possible to respect religious differences and also to maintain shared laws and order. In the following letter to the town of Providence, Williams concedes it is an immense issue, but nevertheless offers his views on reconciling religious freedom with the need for common laws.

1665

To the Town of Providence

That ever I should speak or write a title that tends to such an infinite liberty of conscience is a mistake, and which I have ever disclaimed and abhorred. To prevent such mistakes, I shall at present only propose this case: There goes many a ship to sea with many hundred souls in one ship, whose weal and woe is common, and is a true picture of a commonwealth, or a human combination or society. It hath fallen out sometimes, that both Papists and Protestants, Jews and Turks, may be embarked in one ship; upon which supposal I affirm, that all the liberty of conscience, that ever I pleaded for, turns upon these two hinges - that none of the Baptists, Protestants, Jews, or Turks be forced to come to the ship’s prayers or worship, nor compelled from their own particular prayers or worship, if they practice any. I further add, that I never denied, that notwithstanding this liberty, the commander of this ship ought to command the ship’s course, yea, and also command that justice, peace, and sobriety be kept and practiced, both among the seamen and all the passengers. If any of the seamen refuse to perform their services,

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or passengers to pay their freight; if any refuse to help, in person or purse, towards the common charges or defense; if any refuse to obey the common laws and orders of the ship, concerning their common peace or preservation; if any shall mutiny and rise up against their commanders and officers; if any should preach or write that there ought to be no commanders or officers, because all are equal in Christ, therefore no masters nor officers, no laws or orders, nor corrections nor punishments, I say, I never denied, but in such cases, whatever is pretended, the commander or commanders may judge, resist, compel, and punish such transgressors, according to their deserts and merits. This if seriously and honestly minded, may, if it so please the Father of Lights, let in some light to such as willingly shut not their eyes.

I remain studious of your common peace and liberty. -Roger Williams
(Letters of a Nation, Andrew Carroll, page 6)

UNDER THE RELIGIOUS LIBERTY UMBRELLA are five Baptist Distinctives which help define who a Baptist is and why Binkley Church can be who it is. They are:

- I. Believer's Baptism
- II. Soul Freedom
- III. Sole Authority of the Scriptures
- IV. The Autonomy of the Local Church
- V. Separation of Church and State

I would like to discuss these one at a time, cautioning you to understand that they need to be seen as a whole to understand our Baptist Heritage.

I. BELIEVER'S BAPTISM

We start here because this may be the fly in the ointment for some of us who come from non-Baptist backgrounds to Binkley Church and also because believer's baptism is where it started historically.

At Binkley, we have historically honored baptism from all denominational backgrounds. Baptist Churches who do this are known as "Open Membership Churches." All of the ABC churches I have served have been Open Membership churches. Binkley Church was an open membership church from its beginning. Because of this, Binkley was not welcomed into the Yates Association of Southern Baptist Churches in the 60s, ostensibly because of this policy of open membership, though some folks wondered if that decision were not partly about the interracial openness of Binkley Church. Today, we still honor and consider valid baptism from other Christian backgrounds and when a child has been baptized as an infant we honor their decision to be "confirmed" rather than baptized. But, when we baptize, we do it according to biblical tradition at the age of accountability when an individual can make a free choice and is able to comprehend and choose for themselves. Jesus was baptized as an adult. By his example he "ordained" this ritual, thus it is called, "The Ordinance of Baptism." It is his modeling which is our pattern.

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Also, when we baptize, it is by immersion because the clear translation of the word baptizo in the Greek New Testament is “to dip, or to immerse,” and we read in Matthew 3:16 that Jesus “came up out of the water.”

This form is also particularly validated scripturally by Paul’s words in Romans 6 where Paul describes Baptism as a symbolic “dying and rising with Christ:

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God, so we, too, might walk in newness of life. “ Romans 6:3-4

These were the passages which caused Adoniram and Anne Judson, Thomas Helwys, and others to determine that by conscience and reading of the scriptures they had become Baptists, those who followed the New Testament practice of “Believer’s Baptism.”

There are some Baptist churches and others such as some Disciples of Christ churches, which are rigid in following baptism as scripturally prescribed. But there are also churches like Binkley who understand baptism as a symbol... an ordinance (ordained by the example of Jesus) who see it as “the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace,” and thus honor all baptism.

One of the possible titles we gave to this course was, “Are we immersed or just dry-cleaned?” How many here are immersed? How many dry-cleaned? No matter...by our understanding, we are all baptized into the one body of Christ.

BUT HOW IS IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO HAVE OPEN MEMBERSHIP when some other Baptist churches do not? Because of other Baptist Distinctives, all related to Religious Liberty.

II. SOUL FREEDOM

Another key distinctive is “Soul Freedom,” freedom of conscience in religious matters. Roger Williams coined this phrase. If you ever go to the American Baptist Assembly at Green Lake, WI, you may stay at the Roger Williams Inn or John Clarke Lodge, hear bells ringing hymns from the Judson Tower at 7 a.m., and buy books at the Judson Book Store!

Soul Freedom is the right and responsibility of every individual Christian to relate to God one-to-one without requiring a mediator, to study, pray, and seek God’s inspiration for an understanding of the scripture, and to be a minister to others, what some call “The Priesthood of All Believers.” The Binkley Church motto is, “Every Member a Minister.” and it stems from this crucial distinctive.

This freedom to interpret the scriptures as an individual and to differ with others who interpret them differently is one of the main reasons, along with the autonomy of the local church, for so many different churches and denominations to call themselves “Baptist.” It is also called “Freedom of Conscience in Religious Matters” or “Freedom of Dissent” or “Soul Liberty.”

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In the true Baptist tradition, there is freedom of the pulpit and there is also freedom of the pew. No pastor, no teacher, no parent, no bishop, no creed, can tell you what you have to think, believe, and how you must understand your faith to be a Christian. No one person can prescribe for another. Each discovers it for him or her self. The church's responsibility is to provide the format and the fodder for helping individuals grow and learn and discover God in a personal way.

Soul freedom leads to fierce individualism. It is one of the reasons that it is sometimes said that "wherever 2 or 3 Baptists are gathered together, there will be 4 or 5 opinions." When we see other Baptist denominations, such as SBC, dictating the conscience of its members and requiring creedal acceptance to its litmus tests, it has abandoned one of the distinctives of being Baptist, Soul Freedom.

There is a catch, however, to such freedom. It requires responsible study and accountability within a community of faith where people learn from and with each other. No one has all of the truth. Each of us has some of the truth. Our job is to search together to discover the larger truth. Real freedom, access to the scriptures, has something to do with responsibility and is found in faithful service to God. Once I took my young son and his friend sledding on a hill in a park near our home. After two hours of great fun and freezing feet, we got in the car to go home. I asked him if he had had fun. He replied in a tired voice: "I loved sledding down the hill, but I sure wish we didn't have to walk back up."

Some people think that freedom means sledding down the hill all of the time without having to walk back up. They think freedom should be doing whatever they wish without having to face any consequences or do any work or preparation. Soul freedom is not license to do as you wish, but responsibility to study and learn and work with others. Its motto is often, "We agree to disagree without being disagreeable."

III. THE AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

A key distinctive, and one of the most important for understanding who Binkley Church is, is "The Autonomy of the Local Church." Historically, each Baptist Church was autonomous. That meant... no pope, no bishop, no district superintendent, no denominational hierarchy or board, no outside authority exercising control over the actions and decisions of the congregation. This means that at Binkley we are independent, free to decide on our own who we are, who we will be in God's service. We are free to dissent (lovingly), free to hire and fire pastors, determine our style of worship and our emphases in mission and education. We are autonomous. I like to say we have a "Lowerarchy" rather than a "Hierarchy." In other words, on the congregational organizational chart...a true Baptist church has at the top, "The Congregation." The congregation makes its own decisions, determines its organization and elects its own officers.

The congregation itself is autonomous, free from outside authority or rule, makes its own decisions in faithful interpretation of God's Word, and affiliates with other free churches to accomplish larger goals. This is the "associational principle." We affiliate or associate with

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other similar churches, not because we agree on all things, but because we know that we can accomplish so much more in association; we can learn from each other and we need each other.

Binkley has chosen voluntary association with The American Baptist Church (ABC-USA), with American Baptist Churches of the South (ABCOTS), with TRIANGLE Baptist Churches, with The ALLIANCE of Baptists, and with the ASSOCIATION of Welcoming and Affirming Baptist Churches. Until 1992 we were “dually aligned” with the Southern Baptist Churches, but our decision to be welcoming and affirming led to the dismissal of Binkley from the SBC.

Our associations are not just with Baptist Churches. We are an ecumenical congregation in affiliation with the North Carolina Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches. Nevertheless, we remain independent, autonomous...because that is one of the Baptist distinctives.

IV. SOLE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

You have seen Billy Graham, a renowned Baptist whom I respect for his genuine contributions even though we may not agree on all things. When he preaches, what does he always have in his hand? A Bible.

A sermon in Binkley Church worship almost always is based on what the scripture of the day says to us about the world in which we live and our personal lives. Baptists historically have understood that there is only one authority in matters of faith and practice and that is the scripture.

WE ARE NON-CREEDAL. “American Baptists are not a creedal people and no binding statement of Baptist belief exists...” (This statement is found in one of the ABC generated pamphlets in your orientation packet.)

In Baptist history, the one authority for matters of faith and practice is the scripture. The problem is that different people interpret the scripture in different, sometimes opposite ways. Still, you cannot grasp how the diversity of “Baptists” came about without understanding this distinctive. There are no creeds. When we ‘affirm our faith’ in worship, we are not making a binding statement, but allowing for corporate affirmation which helps us reflect upon as well as affirm our faith.

This makes for problems, though. If there is no official interpretation of scripture, wouldn't that mean that people could go off in a tangent? Wouldn't there be people who take it literally and others who take it symbolically? Well, yes!

When the Baptist principles are SOUL FREEDOM and the AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH, and SOLE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES, then people are free to interpret the scriptures as they feel so led and inspired. And people see things differently. That, more than anything else, is why there are so many different Baptist congregations and denominations. (25

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major Baptist denominations at last count and hundreds – thousands – of independent unaffiliated churches claiming the name “Baptist.”)

But that is why I am a Baptist. I am free to determine as best God inspires me, what my faith is by reading the scriptures... but only with the help of astute biblical scholarship and in the midst of a corrective, loving, spiritual community of faith. (NOTE: Today there is general agreement among Binkley Baptist members that while the sole authority for matters of faith and practice comes from the scriptures, God also speaks and inspires through other means... experience, literature and poetry, people as examples.)

When I spoke of these distinctive at a Catholic Girls High School in Wisconsin, one of the girls raised her hand and said: “But that means you don’t believe anything.”

She just didn’t get it. For her, belief was something imposed, not something discovered. For me, being a Baptist is the freedom to discern God’s leading and discern the meaning of the scriptures without coercion from outside. Historically, it is this RELIGIOUS LIBERTY... soul freedom and autonomy, which is the distinctive mark of a Baptist and a Baptist Church. That does not mean we do not believe anything. The scriptures point us to “belief” and “faith.”

V. SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

The last distinctive is Separation of Church and State. Freedom of worship and religious liberty is the best-known contribution Baptists have made to the Christian faith and to the life of this nation. Without Roger Williams and John Clarke and Rhode Island which they founded as a colony where religious liberty for all was the norm, and all of the colonial Baptists who demanded “freedom of religion without intervention of the state,” you and I might be part of a church-state today. When Roger Williams stood up for believer’s baptism and the separation of church and state in Massachusetts, he was banished for not recanting his errant views. The new world of America was not the land of freedom for Baptists who were imprisoned, put into the stocks, publicly whipped, some tortured or dismembered, and banished for their beliefs. There is still a blue law, I am told, on the books in Mass., which has never been officially erased. It says: “If anyone who sees a Baptist cross the state line, he is free to shoot him on sight.” Freedom of religion today is our right in great part due to their sacrifice and because Baptist founded Rhode Island refused to ratify the bill of Rights without it. That gives us an impression of the rigidity of the state church and helps us to understand the fierce independence of Baptists today. John Adams, future president of the United States, said to Baptists at the continental congress appealing for religious tolerance and freedom: “We might as well expect a change in the solar system as to give up the state church in Massachusetts!”

Baptists argued for freedom of religion not just for themselves, but for all ... Jews, Roman Catholics, Muslim so all would have the opportunity to worship freely without fear.

Today that right is taken for granted. Its key words are “the separation of church and state.” It was the issue at hand in the Supreme Court’s decision to ban prayer in public schools. It was the issue several years ago in Texas where a replica of the tablets listed the 10 commandments in the

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courtroom. My understanding is that the suit to remove it lost, though I am not sure what rationale was used perhaps for its artistic merit. It was the issue in California a few years ago in a lawsuit over the phrase, "In God We Trust," on our coins where a ruling by the California State Supreme Court allowed the phrase to remain, saying that today, "The words are devoid of religious meaning." It is the issue of the present proposal for the Workplace Religious Freedom Act, which would make it tougher for employers to refuse to accommodate the religious practices of workers. And it is the issue of the lawsuit over teaching of the Bible in Florida in public schools (See cover of Raleigh News and Observer, Jan. 24, 1998) where it is alleged that one particular interpretation of the scriptures is being used to proselytize rather than teach objectively the Bible as an influential force in history. One might wonder why Baptists wouldn't be thrilled to have the Bible taught in school. But WHOSE interpretation is being taught? And whose Muslim or Jewish faith is being threatened by state sponsored interpretation of scripture?

Baptists historically have stood up for religious freedom even for those who are atheists, because lack of freedom for one leads to lack of freedom for all. Bill Finlator, a revered socially active preacher and member of our church says that today the ACLU is doing the work of protecting religious freedom rights which Baptists historically used to do. Basically, the separation of church and state affirms the individual's right to act upon theological or atheistic beliefs without interference from the state. What that means is that any attempt by the state to influence in matters of religion is a violation. Unfortunately, some have tried to interpret the term "separation of church and state" to mean the state will keep out of spiritual matters and the church should keep its nose out of political matters. That is not freedom! To tell the church to keep silent on any issue, political or otherwise, is to interfere. I remember my senator as I shared my views on civil rights in the late 60s, telling me to go back to the church and take care of church matters and let him take care of political matters. On the other hand, for government to pass a law establishing the theological viewpoint of one religion as law is a violation of the First amendment which says, "Congress shall make no laws respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

As a result, some Baptists have taken unpopular stands, even with other Baptists, on controversial issues, to protect the religious freedoms of all.

CONCLUSION: So there are five basic Baptist Distinctives which help us understand how Binkley Church can be what it is today.

They should be seen as circular because they build upon and influence each other. They are Believers Baptism, Soul Freedom, Sole Authority of the Scripture, Autonomy of the Local Church, and Separation of Church and State. These, more than any statement of belief, are the reasons why there are so many different kinds of Baptists, and why Binkley Baptist Church can be who it is today.