

How Baptist Churches Function

Where did Baptists come from? A bit of history...

The Early Christian Church that we read about in the New Testament survived persecution and spread across the Roman Empire. Christians were looked down upon in the Roman world but were generally tolerated, with several notable exceptions. They were always considered to be a bit of a 'minority' group in society.

But all that changed when Constantine the Great became Roman Emperor in AD306. It is not entirely clear whether Constantine himself became a Christian but over the following years he granted State tolerance towards Christianity (in AD313) and brought together the Christian Church under his central influence. For the first time the Christian Church had 'official' support from those 'in power', but they also began to be influenced and controlled by those same people. The Church gradually became a defining institution of the Roman Empire and Christendom – society being 'Christian' by default - emerged as the 'norm'.¹

For many centuries, the Church in Europe (at this point, the only church was the Catholic Church) became hugely powerful because of its close association with those who ruled. The institution of the Church became a way that Kings and Queens could control those who lived in their countries and even a mechanism by which they could tax people. There was a mutual benefit for the Church and the State (those in power) to 'stick together', each gaining power and control over 'the masses' from associating with the other.

But things were being done by the Church 'in God's name' which were so far removed from the teaching of Jesus that they could not possibly be called 'Christian'. Some were beginning to question the abuses of power that they saw in the Church, recognising that Christianity no longer reflected the beliefs and practices of the Early Church we read of in the New Testament. One of these people was Martin Luther. Luther protested against what he considered Church abuses, especially with regard to indulgences. Indulgences were 'pardons' that were being sold by priests; forgiveness of people's sin in exchange for often considerable sums of money - 'salvation for sale', if you like. Luther wrote a statement (his '95 Theses') in protest against this practice and nailed it to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany in 1517. Challenging the State Church was a dangerous thing and Luther's protest, along with that of John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli and others, led to a very unsettled and sometimes bloody period of European history now known as the Protestant Reformation – the birth of the Protestant Church as a separate Christian Church from the Catholics resulted.

A new group emerged during the Protestant Reformation; the Anabaptists. They believed in a more literal interpretation of Jesus' teachings and they also practised Believer's baptism instead of baptising babies. Their history is mixed, but eventually they gained some organisation and respectability through leaders such as Menno Simons, who led a group which became known as the Mennonites.² Eventually, the Anabaptist groups settled, mainly in Holland, and their history was soon to coincide with the history of a group of people who would become the first English Baptists.

(See DVD, 'Thomas Helwys' – The birth of Baptists in Europe)

Since the early part of the 16th century, the English monarchy had swung back and forth between the Catholic and Protestant Church (Henry VIII set up the Protestant Church of England in 1543) but basically, the Institution of the Church was still being used abusively as a tool to control the masses by those in power. A group of Christians (who became known as Dissenters) objected to the State

¹ Emperor Theodosius passed a decree establishing a 'Christian State' in AD380 and Christendom 'ruled'.

² The Amish in North America are an example of a very traditional Mennonite group that still exists today

controlling what they thought and believed about God through the State Church. They wanted to live according to their understanding of Jesus' teaching in the Bible and not be told what to think by the State-controlled Church. They formed their own churches which were extremely unpopular with those in power. Thomas Helwys and John Smyth were two such Dissenters who were persecuted by the State Church and fled, with their congregation, to Amsterdam in Holland where they encountered the teachings of the Anabaptists who also wanted to be more like the church in the New Testament and be free of State control. Smyth baptised Helwys and the others in the congregation as those who had believed for themselves the teachings of Jesus and made a decision to follow him. And so the first English Baptist congregation came into being in 1609 – in Amsterdam, Holland.

Smyth and Helwys fell out over some points of doctrine and eventually Helwys left Smyth in Holland and brought back that first English Baptist congregation to Britain³ where it was again persecuted by the State for refusing to recognise it as an authority on what they should believe about God. But the Baptist Church survived and grew, eventually becoming the second largest Protestant denomination (group of churches) in the world.⁴

Baptist DNA

- **The Lordship of Christ** that sets us free to be our true selves
- **The authority of the bible** because in the bible we learn about Christ
- **Baptism for believers** because it expresses a truly personal faith
- **A believer's church** because it is a genuine expression of Christian community, a gathering of Christians called together to be in covenant relationship with each other
- **Direct access to God** because everyone can seek forgiveness, guidance and direction from God for themselves
- **Church Partnership and Church Family Meetings** because in this way we can take responsibility for the life of the church
- **Interdependence** because we need each other and each church needs other churches
- **Sharing the faith** because everyone should have the opportunity to hear the Good News about Jesus that we have heard and experienced
- **Religious freedom** because only free faith is true faith and all should have the freedom to come to their own convictions.⁵

How are Baptist Churches organised?

Local

Each local Baptist church is autonomous – that is to say that it is self-governing. Each local Baptist church therefore makes decisions for itself about how best to serve God in its individual setting. There is no Baptist hierarchy. We do not have Baptist 'Bishops', 'Archbishops', 'Apostles' or 'National Councils' telling us what to believe or how to operate.

The way that each church decides how God wants them to serve him is through prayerful consideration at Church Family Meetings. Some churches have these every month, some every quarter, but the aim of these meetings is to seek God's will for our future as a local congregation. Issues discussed are things such as our Vision, Mission, Leadership, Finances etc. Each local Baptist Church will have a Governing Document or Constitution outlining the processes through which decisions are made. Our Church Constitution is available to all – if you would like a copy, please ask

³ They set up the first Baptist church on English soil in Spittlefields, London in 1612.

⁴ There are an estimated 110 million Baptists worldwide

For more information about Baptist history, please read, Randle, I.M., *Communities of Conviction: Baptist Beginnings in Europe* (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2009)

⁵ Based on Wright, N.G., 'Why be a Baptist?' in *Baptist Basics* (Didcot: BUGB, 2009)

our Minister (Carl) or Church Secretary (John Parsons). Sometimes a vote might be taken following prayer and discussion to decide on bigger issues. Only those who are committed to the church (our Church Partners – see ‘Partnership – getting more involved’) are entitled to vote although everyone can contribute to our discussions.

Leadership in Baptist churches

Baptists believe that God gives everyone gifts (abilities) and that we ought to use them as best we can to serve him. Read the words below from Romans 12:6-8;

⁶ In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. ⁷ If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. ⁸ If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

Although we are all responsible for seeking God’s will for the future of the church, not all will be given the ‘ability to lead’. In Baptist churches, leadership comes from the Minister and a group of Deacons, Elders, or both. These are individuals who have been recognised by the church to have the ability to lead and who are willing to ‘take the responsibility seriously’. They may make some minor decisions on the day-to-day running of the church but it is the role of all those who are committed to the church (the Partners) to seek God’s will together for the future of church.

Most Baptist churches also have ordained Ministers. These are men and women who are recognised locally, regionally and nationally to have a particular calling as a teacher of God’s Word, a pastor, and/or an evangelist.⁶ These particular ‘gifts’ or ‘ministries’ are spoken of in Ephesians 4:11-12

¹¹ Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. ¹² Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.

The considerable responsibility of those ordained as Ministers is to ‘equip God’s people to do his work’ and not to give God’s people a reason for avoiding it! Ordained Ministers are given by God in order to be enablers of the whole congregation; teaching the faith, helping people identify their God-given gifts and supporting and mentoring people as they grow in confidence. They also take a leading role in engaging with the surrounding community and leading in mission. The focus of a Minister is not just upon the church but on the mission of God and the world beyond the church, in the belief that the Christian community exists for the glory of God *and* so that others might hear and believe the Good News about Jesus.⁷

Finance and the Local Baptist Church

Local autonomy also means that every local Baptist church is entirely responsible for its own finances and receives no automatic funding from ‘outside’ the local congregation. The responsibility to meet costs such as the Minister’s stipend (salary) and other church worker salaries, buildings rental, maintenance of properties, resources for mission etc lies entirely with the local congregation who makes up that church. In addition, most local churches also like to give away as much as they can to other charitable organisations across the world.

Smaller churches, or those in poor communities, are able to apply for a national Baptist grant from the Home Mission Fund which helps towards the costs of having a Minister. Watchet Baptist Church has successfully applied to the Home Mission Fund for some financial assistance in recent years. However, it is still the responsibility of all those who are committed to the local church (the

⁶ They will then receive formal theological training and specialist ‘preparation for ministry’.

⁷ Paragraph taken from Wright, N.G., ‘Leadership in the Local Church’ in *Baptist Basics* (Didcot: BUGB, 2009)

Partners) to prayerfully consider how much they can give to the church to support God's work both in our local communities and across the world.

National

Not all local Baptist churches are affiliated to The Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) but Watchet Baptist is one of about 2500 in the U.K who are. BUGB comprises of a national team and a Council, based in Didcot in Oxfordshire, whose aim is to provide resources to local Baptist churches in the U.K. Resources they produce range from things to do with Mission to Theological Reflections that help us to consider more what God thinks about current issues such as the Trident Nuclear Weapons Programme, for example. They do have definite opinions on a variety of subjects, but they don't insist that we automatically share those opinions – we are free to decide for ourselves. However, to be affiliated to BUGB, a local church must agree with their Declaration of Principle which is printed below.

Baptist Union Declaration of Principle

The Basis of the Baptist Union is:

- 1 That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.*
- 2 That Christian Baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who 'died for our sins according to the Scriptures; was buried, and rose again the third day'.*
- 3 That it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world.*

It is also BUGB who recognises and accredits Baptist Ministers to serve in local Baptist churches.

See www.baptist.org.uk for more information about BUGB.

BUGB also has regional offices and staff across the country. Watchet Baptist is part of the South West Baptist Association and our Regional Minister is Jez Brown. His job includes duties such as making sure Ministers in the area are well supported, helping to resolve difficulties in churches, and being responsible for overseeing new churches, amongst many other things.

See www.swbaptists.org.uk for more information about the South West Baptist Association.

Global

The Baptist World Alliance is a fellowship of Baptist conventions and unions (including BUGB) around the world. It is a global movement of Baptists sharing a common confession of faith in Jesus Christ, bonded together by God's love to support, encourage and strengthen one another, while proclaiming and living the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to a lost world.

See www.bwanet.org for more information about the Baptist World Alliance.

If you have any questions or just want to chat about things that have come to mind during this session, I am more than happy to meet up sometime, chat on the phone, or have a conversation by email. My contact details are;

Carl Smethurst
Tel: 01984 639177
Email: minister@watchetbaptist.org.uk