

Who Are the Baptists?

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[0 : 0 0] So, over the last few years, we've studied through the lives of several notable figures! and as I was looking over the list, I think we've covered only two Baptists, John Bunyan! and Charles Spurgeon. So, as I thought about other Baptist forefathers we might consider together, I had trouble choosing only one or two, so I thought, let's just cover all of them.

So, I'm mostly kidding, of course. We don't have that kind of time, but instead of choosing one or two biographies of individual men, I thought we might consider Baptist history as a whole.

I thought, obviously, this will have to be a 30,000-foot view of Baptist history. Unless we decide to spend the remainder of the year on this subject, that's really the best we can do.

We'll simply look at the origin of the Baptist, some of the major movements and issues, and some of the key figures in Baptist history. Now, to give you an idea of where we're going, we will begin at the start of the 17th century in England, and I'll explain why in a moment. So, that means we have more than 400 years of Baptist history we could cover, but I don't have an exact endpoint in mind, necessarily. We'll see how far we get this week and next, and perhaps we'll extend the series from there. We'll see. Now, studying Baptist history can be a challenging endeavor. If for no other reason, we are immediately confronted with two important questions. First of all, where do we even begin?

For the fullest understanding of Baptists, we'd have to go all the way back to the New Testament of the Bible, if not the Old Testament, and work our way up to the present day. I mean, long before there was a so-called Baptist church, you will find Baptist doctrines and practices both in the Bible and throughout church history. But since that's hardly feasible, we have to choose a starting point someplace, somewhere in history. So, what do we choose as our starting point? That's the first question we have to answer. And the second is, what exactly is a Baptist? Now, before someone shoots their hand in the air and says, I know, I know what a Baptist is, you might pause long enough to consider that Baptists have hardly been a monolithic people throughout the last 400 years. There has been a lot of diversity among Baptists. There are Calvinistic Baptists. There are Arminian Baptists. There have been strict communion Baptists. There have been open communion Baptists. There have been missionary Baptists and even anti-missionary Baptists. There have been revivalistic Baptists and confessional Baptists, and some that were actually one and the same, both at the same time. But I think most of us would correctly answer the question, what is a Baptist, by pointing to baptism, right? Even so, we'd have to ask, what about baptism? Are we talking solely about the proper subjects of baptism, that is, believers versus infants? Or are we talking about the proper mode of baptism? Believe it or not, the first Baptist in

[3 : 3 5] England didn't baptize by immersion, they baptized by effusion, that is, pouring water over someone's head. In fact, this was a relatively early controversy, because it's not as though early Baptists could find a Baptist church and be baptized. And so the early controversy was, who is authorized to baptize?

Who's authorized to baptize when there is no Baptist church, or any other pastors willing to essentially negate one's infant baptism in favor of believers' baptism?

So even a question as basic as, what is a Baptist, can be more challenging than you would think. However, I will attempt to provide what I believe is a historically accurate definition of Baptist.

Years ago, as some of you know, I belonged to a Baptist denomination that was born out of the anti-missions movement of the 19th century. And not only that, but they were all what some would call landmark Baptists. Now, landmark Baptists were technically distinct from them, but they shared some of the same views regarding the history of the Baptist church. Namely, they believed that the true church of Jesus Christ was based on an unbroken succession that went all the way back to the apostolic church in the New Testament. In other words, they believed that they represented in both doctrine and practice what the church has always been. So, in their minds, they did not emerge from the Catholic church. They did not have their roots in the Protestant Reformation. Their group was always out there somewhere, someplace, believing and doing exactly what the New Testament teaches, exactly what they themselves do today. So, when I began to question some of their doctrines, I was necessarily forced to study church history to really disprove that theory of unbroken church succession, which wasn't terribly difficult because when I read their early histories written by their own ministers, they traced their lineage right back to the particular

Baptist of England and the Reformation. But I tell you this because it forced me to wrestle with the question of Baptist identity. Who are we? What makes a Baptist a Baptist? Now, the problem is that I'm not sure we could come to a coherent definition of Baptist if we were to say, examine Baptists in the 21st century.

[6 : 25] I mean, we couldn't even really point to Scripture alone as a fundamental Baptist belief these days. As early as the 19th century, in the days of Charles Spurgeon, we see Baptist churches begin to move into a liberal form of Christianity that essentially rejected Scripture alone. So, where do we look for an accurate definition of Baptist identity? Well, I will argue that our best, clearest understanding of Baptist identity comes from the 17th century. And here's why. First, the Baptist movement began in the 17th century.

Second, it had time to mature throughout the 17th century. Third, you might say it was refined through primarily the crucible of persecution in that century. And fourth, apart from some aspects of soteriology, that is the doctrine of salvation, the Baptists were almost entirely unified regarding every other Orthodox teaching, not to mention the Baptist distinctives, those things that made them distinct from other groups, such as believer's baptism. So, in the 17th century, you see the beginning of Baptists, the maturity and the refinement of Baptists, and the unity of Baptists. But once we move beyond the 17th century, well, a clear Baptist identity becomes increasingly complicated, because you do see unorthodox teachings introduced, and you do see various factions form, and Baptists start to move in different directions. Even believer's baptism. The one issue we'd all point to as that defining characteristic of Baptists isn't necessarily abandoned or changed in the 18th century, but in a somewhat surprising and somewhat confusing twist, some Baptists begin practicing baby dedications.

It's almost as though they wanted to come as close to infant baptism as they could without actually baptizing infants. In short, once we move beyond the 17th century in Baptist history, trying to define Baptist identity becomes a little harder. It might be impossible if we started in the 21st century.

So, what is a Baptist? Well, first of all, Baptists are thoroughly Orthodox. Again, this may not be true for every group using the name Baptist today, but in the 17th century, and for most Baptists throughout history, Baptists have been Orthodox. They have agreed with the historic church creeds and confessions, such as the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed. They have affirmed the authority of Scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity, human sinfulness, the need for regeneration, salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. They have affirmed the two ordinances of the church, baptism and the Lord's Supper, as opposed to the seven sacraments of the Catholic church or the Anglican church. Yes, there has always been both Arminian and Calvinist Baptists, but Baptists have historically shared a biblical orthodoxy with other Protestant denominations.

And I believe this is important to note for a couple of reasons. In a moment, we'll get to the so-called beginning of the Baptist story, and that beginning centers on one man, a man by the name of John Smith. But we shouldn't get the impression that the Baptist church was invented by Smith, or that the Baptist church popped up out of nowhere with no connection to the church throughout history.

[10 : 29] This is not Joseph Smith, who claimed to have dug up a new word from God, which, oddly enough, contradicted the word of God, and started a new religion on some very unorthodox teachings.

The Mormon church, which he started, doesn't believe God is eternal, doesn't believe in the Trinity, doesn't believe Jesus is both fully God and fully man. But that's a much different story than the Baptist story. John Smith and the Baptist church were thoroughly orthodox. So the Baptist movement wasn't the start of a new religion. It was, you might say, a further refinement, and I believe a natural continuation of the Reformation. And I also believe it's important to note their orthodoxy, because as we'll see throughout the 17th century, Baptists did everything they could to make it clear that they were united in orthodoxy with their Presbyterian, and Congregational, and Puritan, and sometimes even Anglican brothers and sisters in Christ. They were not a radical sect. They were not a weird cult.

They were not trying to isolate themselves from the broader Protestant world. Yes, they clearly had some distinctives from other groups, but they were still orthodox. So a Baptist is, first of all, orthodox.

And second, a Baptist is evangelical. Now, what do I mean by evangelical? Well, put simply, an evangelical is a Christian who centers everything on the gospel of Christ, trusts the Bible as God's authoritative word, insists on personal conversion, and new birth, and is active in spreading and living out that faith.

Now, I don't know that I've ever read a book on Baptist history that explicitly emphasized the Baptist movement as evangelical. Maybe it was assumed, but I believe we should really do so. We should emphasize that point because it locates Baptists in the mainstream of orthodox, gospel-centered, Protestant Christianity, as opposed, again, to some fringe group with a few quirky practices.

[12 : 55] In other words, the Baptist identity centers on the gospel, not baptism. Even the Baptist view regarding baptism centers on the need for genuine repentance and conversion for salvation, not really on the act of baptism itself. Plus, again, it ties the Baptist church to the broader Protestant movement, not to mention Reformed theology despite any of the particular differences, rather than treating the Baptist church as completely unique and a completely isolated faction. You see what I mean?

By the way, every now and then I've heard someone say, you can't be Reformed if you're a Baptist. There is no such thing as a Reformed Baptist. And their primary argument usually focuses on baptism. They'll argue that all Reformed churches prior to the Baptist were pedo-Baptists.

They baptized infants. More than that, their baptism of infants was based upon really an even more fundamental issue, which was their understanding of the covenant of grace.

Now, we may come back to that, but for now, let me just say in response that the majority of the Baptists in the 17th century fully embraced Reformed soteriology and shared most of the Reformed confessional theology outside of baptism and maybe church government, right?

So, it's a bit like looking at my daughter who has blonde hair and looking at Danae and I who have brown hair and saying, she can't be your daughter. She may look like you in every other way, her mouth, her eyes, her nose. She may have a birth certificate with your names on it. You may emphatically claim she is your daughter, but her hair color is different, so clearly she doesn't belong to you.

[14 : 59] Again, Baptists have distinctions from other Reformed groups, obviously. But as we'll see in a moment, those differences aren't as great as maybe some people would make them out to be.

So, having said that, let's continue to define Baptists by considering exactly what makes them distinct from other Protestants in the 17th century. Now, if you're expecting me to start the list with baptism, you're only half right. But before we can understand the issue of baptism, we have to understand why the Baptists held the position they did. Baptists, they didn't look at the baptisms of infants and think to themselves, you know, I think it would be better if these people were maybe bigger and older before we baptized them. It had everything to do with the church body itself. When they examined the New Testament, they saw a clear pattern of the church being made up exclusively of regenerated, repentant, professing believers, which means no one but regenerated, repentant, professing believers were baptized into the church, and that, of course, would exclude infants. Now, many of us might hear that today and think, well, isn't that obvious, but you have to understand the historical context.

For a long time, the Catholic Church followed a so-called parish model. Remember that we're talking about a time when church and state were closely intertwined. So, if you lived in a Catholic-dominated region, you were under civic responsibility to belong to your local parish. So, if you were a citizen of a town, you were also a member of the local parish. So, if you were born into that town, you were baptized as an infant into that local parish. And this model continued even after the Reformation. Even after England became Protestant, specifically Anglican, a person born into a particular region would mean that they would be a member of that region's local parish. So, they were baptized into that parish even as an infant very early in their lives. Then, after the Puritans and the Separatists, like the Presbyterians, moved away from the Anglican Church, they continued to follow that same model, but with a slightly different emphasis. Rather than speak in terms of civic duty when it comes to infant baptism, they taught it as a covenantal faith-based act. But then, as Baptists emerged from the same

Puritan separatist movement, they said, wait a minute, according to the New Testament, a person isn't baptized into the church involuntarily or out of a sense of civic responsibility. They're baptized because they have personally, individually come to faith in Christ. We don't see a category in Scripture for unbelieving, unregenerate church members. We don't see infants being baptized in Scripture. So, while it certainly remained controversial, every other church was practicing this parish model with infant baptisms. The Baptists dissented. They said, no, we don't baptize infants because the church body should be made up of regenerate believers. So, what makes a Baptist a Baptist?

So far, we've covered Baptists are Orthodox, Baptists are Evangelical, and Baptists practice believers' baptism because they believe in the church, the New Testament model of a regenerate church membership. Now, I would love to add Baptists are Calvinists to that list. And I believe a strong case could be made as we look at the trends and the momentum of the 17th century. But I won't go quite that far. In fact, the Baptist movement, as we'll see, didn't begin with Calvinists. Asterisk. We'll come back to that. It actually began with Arminians. However, our list isn't complete just yet. I have two more.

[19 : 43] Next, Baptists believe in local church autonomy and practice a congregational polity. In simple terms, this means only Christ is the head of the church. And each local church should govern itself according to Scripture without any outside interference. This means no denominational hierarchy, no church courts, no overseeing boards that dictate what the church can or cannot do, believe or cannot believe. And this was true from the very beginning. From the beginning, Baptists practiced elder-led congregational rule with a strong belief in a plurality of elders or pastors when possible. And this, of course, set them apart from, say, their Presbyterian brothers and other Protestants. By the way, local church autonomy would later become kind of a sticky point in particularly

American Baptist history. As much as Baptists always practiced local autonomy, they would often form associations of churches. And those associations would sometimes blur the line between cooperation for mutual help and denominational interference. So at times, they would become somewhat controversial.

So we'll come to that. Now, almost all of us would readily know that baptism is a Baptist distinctive. At least some of us might have named congregational polity. But I believe there's yet one more Baptist distinctive that may not jump to mind right away, but it lies at the heart of the entire Baptist movement in both England and early America. And if you've lost track, this is number five on my list of what makes a Baptist a Baptist.

And number five is, we'll call this one liberty of conscience. In what would become the greatest, most enduring formal creed or confession among the Baptists, the 1689 or Second London Confession, our Baptist forefathers wrote, God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men that are contrary to or not contained in his word. God alone is Lord of the conscience, which means the magistrate or the governing authorities have no rightful power to force religious belief or worship because the conscience belongs to God. Later in the Confession, they write, civil rulers must not assume the administration of the word and sacraments or interfere in matters of faith.

They are to protect the church so believers may worship God freely. So the magistrate is ordained by God to preserve justice and peace and order, but he does not have the right to interfere in church doctrine or practice.

[23 : 04] He should not assume authority in the church. The church and state have these distinct jurisdictions under God with distinct purposes. And this is where the Baptists parted ways from other reformed churches. The Presbyterians Westminster Confession, for example, allowed the magistrate an overseeing role in the church, but the Baptist Confession, the 1689, explicitly rejected that because they knew and experienced the troubles that come from intermingling church and state.

But even more than a practical concern, they also saw the principles of this church-state separation in the Bible. So to summarize what makes a Baptist a Baptist, a Baptist is orthodox, evangelical, practices believer's baptism, practices a congregational polity, and believes in religious freedom or liberty of conscience.

Now, if you're surprised by that last one, you will quickly understand why religious freedom became a distinguishing mark of the early Baptists. In fact, we have the early Baptists in America largely to thank for the religious freedom we enjoy today, but we'll come to that.

For now, in the time remaining, let's consider the beginning of the Baptist story. So, backing up just a little bit, in the year 1517, Martin Luther nails his 95 theses to the church in Wittenberg, Germany, marking the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther and other reformers who followed would challenge the authority of the Pope. They rejected the predominant system of salvation by sacraments and works. They insisted that Scripture alone is our authority, and that sinners are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And as these doctrines took hold, entire nations began to change, including England. However, England's reform unfolded in a somewhat unique way. In 1534, King Henry VIII, motivated primarily by politics, not by religion, passed the act of supremacy, making him the, quote, supreme head of the Church of England.

Now, the Church of England was still Catholic, but this really wasn't meant to be a religious reform. He just wanted the church under his control, not Rome's. But as the decades passed, the church's theology increasingly reformed until it was no longer Catholic, but Anglican. But during this time, there's a lot of push and pull. Whenever a new king or queen took the throne, they would either push for more Protestant reforms, or they would try to pull back some of those reforms. And by 1559, Queen Elizabeth I basically says, you know what, I think we've gone far enough. The Church of England is Protestant now. The reforms have to stop somewhere, right? So I think this is as good a place as any.

[26 : 25] Let's just quit right here. Well, as far as some were concerned, the Church of England had not yet gone far enough in its reforms. It may be theologically Protestant, but it looks and sounds a lot like the Catholic Church. So from these men rose the Puritan movement, a movement that sought to further purify or further reform the Church of England primarily from within. However, some Puritans eventually came to the conviction that the Church of England was beyond reform, and they chose to separate entirely, and these became known as the, surprise, separatists. So eventually, Presbyterians and Congregationalists would grow out of this Puritan movement, and some other Congregationalists, the Baptists and the Pilgrims, who would eventually travel to America. They all grew out of the

Separatist movement. Obviously, our focus is on the Baptists, but that gives you an idea of the trajectory these movements were on. Now, jumping ahead just a few years, there's a well-educated, Cambridge-trained minister in the Church of England by the name of John Smith.

That's S-M-Y-T-H. This was a very serious man. He was by no means some kind of religious radical, but he came under Puritan convictions. The Church had not yet gone far enough in its reforms.

And as he continued studying Scripture, and he watched what was happening in the Church, he became increasingly convinced that the Church of England would never go far enough in its reforms. So he made the decision to leave the Church, becoming a Separatist, and he moved to a Separatist congregation in Gainesboro. But this is late 16th, early 17th century England. Separatist churches are illegal. In 1593, Queen Elizabeth passed the Act against seditious sectaries, which specifically targeted the Separatists. And King James I of King James Bible fame, he continued to enforce that law. So Separatist churches, their meetings were raided, pastors and church members were heavily fined, and those fines could ruin families. And many were imprisoned, often for very long stretches of time in very harsh conditions. In fact, Smith himself spent a year in prison for preaching without a license. So around 1608, John Smith and his congregation in England fled to

Amsterdam in Holland, where there was considerably more religious freedom. Plus, one of Smith's old professors, a Separatist himself had already moved to Amsterdam and planted a church, so his plan was for them to simply join that church. However, it didn't quite work out that way. It didn't take long for Smith and his old professor, Francis Johnson, to butt heads over a few issues. They disagreed over how church leadership should be organized. Johnson believed in three distinct leadership positions in the church, while Smith saw only one in Scripture, that is pastor or elder, though Smith did believe in a plurality of elders. They also disagreed over the use of man-made helps in worship, such as the Book of Common Prayer used by the Church of England. Smith was adamantly against using any man-made writings in the liturgy of worship. In fact, he actually went as far as to reject Bible translations. In his mind, God inspired the Bible only in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and he believed we're all capable of learning these languages, so no man-produced translation is even necessary. Kind of taking the church right back to where they were before the Reformation as far as the Bible goes. And lastly, they disagreed over the government aid that Johnson and his church were receiving. Amsterdam was actually paying English settlers for coming to Holland and contributing to their economy, but Smith argued that the church and its ministers should be supported entirely voluntarily by its members, not given aid from the government.

[31 : 27] He considered state funds a corruption of the church. So, Smith and his people, they leave Johnson and his church, but they don't return to England. You see, it was around this time, maybe 1609, that Smith becomes convinced that the New Testament teaches only believers' baptism. And he lays out his case in a little treatise titled, The Character of the Beast. In summary, he says, first of all, baptism, according to the Bible, is meant to typify our baptism of the Spirit, which is only experienced by believers, right?

Second, he argues that nowhere in the Bible do we see a clear command or teaching to baptize anyone other than believers. And third, nowhere in Scripture do we find an example of anyone other than a believer being baptized. But he doesn't stop there. The treatise is called The Character of the Beast because, Smith argues, very extremely, infant baptism is a mark of the beast. He believes it's a symbol of false religion because it's giving to unbelievers what should be reserved for believers only. It's creating a church of unregenerate people. Now, this creates a very unique dilemma for Smith and his people.

If every church that practices infant baptism is essentially a false church in their minds, an apostate church, where can they go? In the early 17th century, they're surrounded by a sea of apostasy as far as they're concerned. The Catholics baptize infants, the Protestants baptize infants, at this time the Puritans, the Separatists, they all baptize infants. Where did they go? What do they do?

Well, Smith decides he has no choice but to baptize himself. And when critics said, you can't baptize yourself because that's not biblical either. Maybe infant baptism is not biblical, but baptizing yourself, you're not going to find that in the Bible. Well, Smith falls back on the argument that separatists were already using to form new churches by saying that a true church doesn't have to necessarily be planted by a true church. Otherwise, the Protestant Reformation wouldn't have gotten anywhere. The separatists were already arguing you don't need another church's authority to start a church as long as you have the Bible's authority. So if you have a group of true believers following the Bible faithfully, they can break away from a false church and start a true church.

I mentioned the landmark Baptist earlier, the belief that the Baptist should be able to trace an unbroken lineage all the way from the present day back to the apostles without ever passing through any kind of apostate or false church. But the separatists argued that that notion, they really argued against that notion, I should say, because as they planted new churches, they did so without the Church of England's approval. And Smith, he picks up that same argument when he baptizes himself. He effectively says, I don't need someone else to baptize me when there isn't anyone else to baptize me. So he baptizes himself by a fusion. He pours the water over himself, and then he baptizes the rest of the congregation in the same way. And with that, with this small group of approximately 50 people, we have the first English-speaking Baptist church.

[35 : 28] It was the first among the separatists to commit itself to a regenerate church membership where identifying with the body of Christ was reserved exclusively for those who had personally embraced the gospel and made a profession of faith. So with this group, we see we have four, at least four of the five marks of a Baptist church, as I defined them earlier. In fact, I didn't mention that John Smith was not only Orthodox and Evangelical, but he was actually also a Calvinist. His earliest writings from 1603 and 1605 strongly defend what we commonly refer to as the doctrines of grace. Really, the only mark missing at this point is a clear articulation of religious freedom, but even that is somewhat implied by the fact that Smith and these people left England for the distinct purpose of pursuing religious freedom. Seems rather obvious that they did, in fact, believe in the principles of religious freedom. Now, when most historians try to point to a precise starting place for Baptist history, they nearly always point to John Smith. But that's not to say there weren't people before him who believed and practiced believer's baptism. That's not to say there weren't people who practiced a biblical model for church government or had a biblical understanding of the church-state relationship, but when we're talking about the Baptist church as we know it today, Smith is a pretty good place to start. However, he would not be the man who would carry this Baptist movement forward. If left to Smith, it never would have been a movement. It would have died with him. Why do I say that? Well, he left the movement. Over the next few years, following his self-baptism, Smith, first of all, became persuaded of

Arminianism. Arminianism was relatively strong in Amsterdam, and he listened to a lot of theological debates over Arminianism versus Calvinism, and he eventually changed his mind about it. Namely, he came to believe in a general atonement where Christ died for everyone rather than only God's elect, and he came to believe in resistible grace, which is to say the sinner has the power to reject God's saving call.

Second, with the help of some Mennonites in the area, whom Smith was now associating himself with, he came to regret baptizing himself. He said that his self-baptism might have been a little hasty.

Plus, his soteriology, his understanding of salvation is now closer aligned with the Mennonites than with his Puritan separatist background. So, he thinks, maybe I shouldn't be leading a new church when these Mennonites certainly appear to be a true church. They even practice believers' baptism. So, he goes back to this group, and he says, I have an idea. Let's just join the Mennonite church.

And for the most part, those 50 people, they all agree. They all agree to move to the Mennonite church and be rebaptized and absorbed into that church. There is, however, one notable exception, and that is a man by the name of Thomas Helwys, H-E-L-W-Y-S, Thomas Helwys.

[39 : 28] Helwys was a wealthy lay member of the church. It's at least possible that he may have funded their move to Amsterdam. And he was also well-known as a well-studied, kind of an independent thinker.

So, when Smith does an about-face regarding his baptism, Helwys strongly disagrees. He had followed Smith to Amsterdam. He had followed him even into Arminianism, but he could not follow him into the Mennonite church. And he had several reasons for this, but I would say the biggest one was that the Mennonite church there did not believe Christ received physical humanity from Mary. In other words, Jesus really wasn't a man. He merely had what they called a celestial body. God gave him what appeared to be a human body. And as it happened, John Smith actually eventually fell into several strange and false doctrines. And so, by the end, he was really moving away from orthodoxy. So, Helwys, he dodged a pretty big bullet. And as we'll talk about next time, he and maybe a dozen others decide to part ways from Smith and actually return to England. Helwys was a bit of a visionary in this respect.

He thought, despite the persecution in England, if this movement is to go anywhere, it would have to be rooted in the motherland. It would have to be rooted in England. But we'll talk about that more next time. Pick up the story from there. Let's pray.

Our gracious Lord, we thank you for your faithfulness that you've shown to your church throughout history. Help us to always hold fast to the gospel and to walk humbly in light of your word.

May what we learned from history deepen our love for Christ and for his church. And we ask this in Jesus' precious name. Amen.