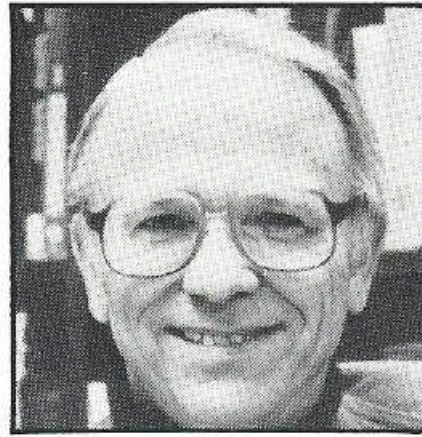


WHAT
BAPTISTS
BELIEVE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
CHAPTER ONE: A FELLOWSHIP OF TRUE DISCIPLES	6
CHAPTER TWO: A PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS.....	8
CHAPTER THREE: A CONGREGATION UNDER THE WORD OF GOD	11
CHAPTER FOUR: PARTICIPANTS IN THE GOSPEL ORDINANCES	14
CHAPTER FIVE: A SPIRITUAL DEMOCRACY AT WORK.....	17
CHAPTER SIX: A FREE CHURCH IN A FREE STATE	20

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, a twenty-year-old secretary went to a Dallas bank to get some traveler's checks. "What denomination?" asked the teller. "Why, Baptist, of course," she replied.

Many Baptists who don't agree that they are a denomination might question her terminology, but they would know what she meant. She was a Baptist and proud of it.

Baptists do not consider their faith a Church. There is no Baptist Church, only Baptist churches. Each local congregation runs its own affairs. No one, it seems, can tell Baptists what to do, think, or believe religiously without having a fight on his hands. They have no formal creed, no sacraments, no set procedures for weddings or funerals. Although they are loosely organized into about thirty national associations, no one group has any general power: all may merely recommend ways in which like-minded Baptists can work together. As a result, there is a wide variety in their denominational life.

Some congregations such as the huge First Baptist Church, Dallas, feature oratorical preaching and missionary fund raising, while Primitive Baptists are opposed to modern missionary societies. There are Baptists who attend church on Saturday instead of Sunday, others whose uninhibited emotionalism causes marching in the church aisles. They have always attracted the poor, but they also include oil tycoons. There are Northern Baptists, Southern Baptists, all-white Baptists, all-black Baptists, integrated Baptists, and foreign-language Baptists. Some of their names: Free Will, Seventh-day, Separate, Regular, General, and Six Principle reflect their special emphasis.

Some Baptists regularly make the news headlines. The world's best known evangelist, Billy Graham, is a Baptist. Jerry Falwell, widely-heard television preacher, is a Baptist, and the former president of Liberia, Dr. William R. Tolbert, was a Baptist. Yet Baptist churches for the most part are filled with common folk whose names will never appear in print until the obituary listings announce their deaths.

Sectional, racial, and national origins help explain these differences. For example, there is a noticeable conflict between the English stock rural South and the multiracial, urbanized North. Complex theological winds in the North, blowing since the Civil War, have only recently shifted southward. In their wake they left three conservative Baptist groups across the northern states. Even beyond theology, however, Baptists reflect differences in music, in dialect, and in organizational skills.

Within this great diversity, Baptists show a remarkable unity on certain fundamentals. Their name "Baptist" stems from a unanimous belief in baptism by immersion, and their rejection of infant baptism. They hold that a baptized person must be old enough to respond in personal faith to Jesus Christ. They also maintain that every member is the equal, socially and religiously, of every other member. Although the pastor is the leader of the flock, his interpretations of the Bible in sermons are not binding on his hearers, since every Baptist must decide for himself what God is saying to him through the Scriptures.

Baptists contend that Jesus is the supreme authority, and that His purposes are revealed only through the Bible. In matters of religion, no institution, tradition, or dogma can dictate to them. A committee in Washington, D.C., called the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, protests any violation of the First Amendment, any expenditure of public funds on religious institutions, or any diplomatic representation at the Vatican.

A visitor can usually recognize a Baptist church by its interior. The auditorium makes no pretense of creating a mystical atmosphere. It is dominated by a pulpit to accentuate the fact that preaching is all-important. Behind the pulpit stands the preacher in a business suit, rather than a vestment. A baptistry is usually prominent. This is a water tank or enclosure for holding about four feet of water. When a new member is baptized, the preacher descends into the water and the candidate is brought before him. The pastor, in the name of the Trinity, immerses the candidate below the surface of the water. This symbolizes both Christ's death and resurrection and the believer's burial as a sinner and his rebirth as a Christian. When indoor baptistries are not available, preachers lead their flocks to a river and immerse the candidates there.

At regular intervals, each congregation holds a business meeting. The entire membership may participate, and matters affecting the congregation are settled by majority vote. In practice, much routine is delegated to the pastor, his deacons, and sometimes a board of committee chairmen who are elected in open meeting. This personal voice in church affairs encourages participation in church work and loyalty to the cause.

Christianity has never lacked witnesses to these beliefs of Baptists. Early Christians baptized only believers, and the followers of John Hus in the fourteenth century preached the primacy of Scripture. But churches founded on that cluster of convictions we call Baptist arose as a result of the Protestant reformation. The Reformation of the sixteenth century, which gave birth to Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Anglicans, rediscovered four fundamental Christian truths: (1) man is saved not by religious works but by God's grace through faith in Christ; (2) religious authority lies not in a visible institution known as the Roman Church but in the Bible; (3) all believers are truly priests since every Christian must be "a Christ to his neighbor"; (4) the essence of Christian living is serving God in one's calling whether in a secular or a church vocation.

Baptists had no quarrel with these beliefs. They gladly embraced them. Baptists felt, however, that these principles, properly applied, produce churches composed only of baptized believers. They regarded the Protestant Reformation a job half done until churches were established according to the New Testament pattern for churches. Baptists, in short, accept the basic beliefs of the Reformation churches, but they disagree sharply with how they apply to the life of the church.

A survey of modern Baptist history, beginning with the sixteenth-century Puritan movement in England and proceeding to our own times, will show how Baptists themselves have modified their views under various influences. In America, for example, religious revivals and the doctrine of individualism have significantly shaped Baptist thinking about the church. Nor is there an escape from certain forces of our own time. But Baptists profess the standard of the Bible in all matters of faith. The supreme question for them, then, must be, what does the Bible say the church is?

CHAPTER ONE: A FELLOWSHIP OF TRUE DISCIPLES

The name *Baptist* probably leads many people to think that baptism is the distinctive emphasis among Baptists. But this isn't so. Baptism is important, but its meaning depends upon a prior conception of the church.

Baptists believe that the church is first and fundamentally a brotherhood of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, a society He founded and a community in which He lives by His Spirit. When stressing this point, they usually speak of a regenerate church membership. The church, they insist, can only be viewed from the truths of the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ, His ministry, His death, His resurrected life, and His personal return to earth.

Jesus was a Jew steeped in the thinking of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is the story of God's own community, the congregation of the Lord, the people of Israel, selected and disciplined to do God's will. The Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, used the word *ecclesia*, "assembly" or "church," to designate this society. Thus the church has its roots in the Old Testament.

The new thing Jesus taught was the special place He filled in the conception of the church. He said He had come to inaugurate a New Covenant (Mark 14:24), a society founded not on laws written in stone but on a law inscribed on the heart. This new covenanted community was marked by personal loyalty to Him. No longer were men and women counted as God's people because they were born in a particular nation. They became members by virtue of their relation to Jesus Christ through faith in His death and resurrection from the dead.

Today, say Baptists, as in New Testament times, Jesus Christ calls men and women to Himself, and the church is a community which He perpetually creates and in which He lives. Apart from His presence Christian worship is an empty ritual; but filled with His presence His church is transformed into a fellowship with life and power.

This intimate union between Christ and His people is underscored throughout the New Testament. The letters of the Apostle Paul, in particular, compare the church to a body with Christ as its head (I Cor. 12:12-30; Rom. 12:4-5; Eph. 4:12-16). In the Ephesian letter Paul teaches that the church is like a bride and Christ like a bridegroom (Eph. 5:21-33). And in the first letter to the Corinthians he pictures the church as a holy temple filled by God's Spirit and built upon Christ, its irreplaceable foundation (I Cor. 3:10-17).

The church of the apostles and of all subsequent generations is the church of Christ. He purchased it with His blood (Acts 20:28) and He lives in it, giving forgiveness, unity, and power. Apart from Him the church becomes a company of well-meaning men and women whose opinions and activities are no more important than anyone else's. Christ, and Christ alone, makes the church the people of God.

On this much most Christians agree. To understand the distinctive emphasis of Baptists we must ask, how do we discover Christ's presence in the church? Roman Catholics are inclined to answer this question: "In the sacrifice of the mass, in the offering of the body and blood of Christ on the altar by a true priest of God." Lutherans tend to respond, "In the proper teaching of the gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments." And Presbyterians are likely to answer, "In the relationships of the divine covenant." Baptists, however, respond, "We find Christ's presence in the community of believers united on the basis of confession of personal faith in Jesus Christ." Baptists insist that churches should be assemblies of believers who have heard the call of the gospel directly and personally. Viewed in this light the church becomes a fellowship of the twice born.

This is why Baptist churches stress preaching and conversion. As children of the Reformed faith, Baptists contend that proclaiming the Word is essential for the life of the church. This explains the location of the pulpit in the center of their church buildings and the large place given to the sermon in their services. They are justly proud of their pulpit giants, past and present: John Bunyan in the seventeenth century, Robert Hall in the eighteenth, Charles Hadden Spurgeon in the nineteenth, and George W. Truett and Billy Graham in the twentieth. At times, however, this emphasis on preaching has tended to overshadow other important aspects of the church's calling, and congregations have usually grown or declined with the coming or going of some preacher.

The answer to this problem doesn't call for less preaching from the pulpit but for more participation in the body. Preaching, important as it is, is only one of the gifts of the Spirit. Other believers are also witnesses of Christ and are responsible to fulfill their calling for the health of the whole body.

The second emphasis which arises from the Baptist concern for a fellowship of the twice born is conversion. In Christian circles, conversion refers to the turning of a person from a life controlled by sin and self-will to a life dominated by forgiveness and Christ's way. Baptists believe that men need to be changed by God's Spirit before they enter the fellowship of the church. They find this in the New Testament when Jesus tells Nicodemus, "You must be born anew" (John 3:7), and when Paul describes the Thessalonian believers who "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (I Thess. 1:9).

Often among Baptists conversion is regarded as a single all-important moment in the Christian experience, a crisis time when a person makes a decision with lifelong consequences. "Are you saved?" they ask. And if the response is yes, many Baptists feel all is well. They tend to think that such a decision for Christ is the beginning and end of Christian experience, and as a result they often ignore the means God has given the believer for Christian growth.

Conversion rightly seen is the beginning of a new life. We turn from idols *to serve the living God*. The new birth in Christ must be nurtured by spiritual disciplines in our personal life, in our home life, and in our church life.

When Baptists are true to the biblical insights of their own past, they recognize that spiritual health is dependent upon a living association with Christ's people in the fellowship of the church. In his *Journal*, John Wesley mentioned the advice he once received from an unnamed serious man. "Sir," the man said, "you wish to serve God and go to heaven? Remember that you cannot serve Him alone. You must therefore find companions, or make them; the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion." The stranger was right.

The Acts of the Apostles records that after Peter urged his audience on the Day of Pentecost to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus, about three thousand received his word, were baptized, and were added to the church (Acts 2:37-42). This and other New Testament accounts of conversions and church growth are not mere accidents. The church is God's established means of meeting a deep-seated need of man, the need to belong. If marriage is God's ordained way to family solidarity, the church is God's established way to spiritual maturity.

Genesis teaches that man is created not to be alone, but to find fulfillment in others (Gen. 2:18). Man is socially made. He must belong. Sin, however, destroys fellowship and community. Genesis also teaches this. God's answer to man's alienation is first, forgiveness and reconciliation with his Creator through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection and, second, acceptance and community in the body of Christ (Eph. 2:19). Man is created for fellowship and recreated for fellowship. A Christian believer's spiritual existence and growth are linked therefore with his vital participation in a company of God's people under the influence of the Word of God.

Long ago Paul wrote the Corinthians, "Do you despise the church of God?" (I Cor. 11:22). It seemed to him incredible that people who professed to know anything of Christ and His will should regard the church carelessly or casually. Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it (Eph. 5:25). He lives in it by His Spirit and through it He is at work in the world. How then can His own professed people despise it or neglect it? How can they use the church so long as it fits their purposes and then with no apparent qualms, cut themselves off when it is convenient to do so? The New Testament knows nothing of Christians not vitally linked to the church. To belong to Christ is to belong to His people.

Baptists have caught a glimpse of this high vision of the church. The body of Christ means to them churches of converted people. They are not persuaded that the Lord's promise, "Lo, I am with you always" means Christ's presence in some sacred liturgy, some special office, or some holy sacrament. On the contrary, they believe that Christ may be found primarily in the lives of men and women who have experienced His forgiveness offered in the gospel. That is the starting point for understanding Baptist beliefs.

CHAPTER TWO: A PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS

The second biblical principle that helps us understand the Baptist perspective on the church is usually designated the priesthood of believers. This idea holds that the church is one body in Christ and all the members of the body occupy the same relation to Him, whatever their special gift or office. The church has no distinctive class of priests; all members are made “priests unto God” by the death of Christ (Rev. 1:5-6).

This truth was one of the great rediscoveries of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Martin Luther and John Calvin challenged the medieval Catholic Church at this decisive point. Were laymen to have or not to have a voice in spiritual questions? The resounding yes of the Reformers created a revolution in the way Christians thought about the church.

The medieval Church was a highly institutionalized system, resting on the dogma that only those in holy orders, the properly ordained priests of God, could admit a person to the presence of God. In them Christ had placed the authority for the church. They were in the succession of the apostles and by their control of the sacraments they held the keys of the kingdom of God. Since ordination had made priests a class set apart by God, ordinary members were completely dependent upon them for spiritual instruction and saving grace.

Luther rejected all this. He discovered that the New Testament had no such concept. Nowhere did the apostles claim that the church’s authority was vested in themselves and that this authority was to be transmitted by them to others. On the contrary, when they felt that someone should be placed in the position surrendered by Judas when he sinned, they laid the matter before the church and asked the church to deal with it (Acts 1:21-26).

In a similar way, the New Testament recognizes no separate order of priests. It speaks of all believers as priests (Rev. 1:6). It calls the church itself “a holy priesthood” chosen by God “to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (I Pet. 2:5).

And what are believers to offer to God? They offer first themselves, as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1). In the light of God’s mercies to them, they present themselves unreservedly to God for His purpose in the church and in the world.

Then, they offer the sacrifice of praise to God (Heb. 13:15), the fruit, not of some vine, but the fruit of lips filled with thankfulness. Clearly, the New Testament assumes that believers have access to God apart from human mediators, for there is only “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (I Tim. 2:5,6).

Luther saw this truth clearly. Unfortunately he was never able to embody it adequately. After the opening years of his reform in Germany he was forced to rely on the princes of Saxony for support, and after his death added influences produced a Lutheran clerical class in alliance with the state. Functionally, Lutherans created their own priesthood.

Among the reforming groups of the sixteenth century only the despised Anabaptists sought a radical return to the New Testament priesthood of believers. They established churches on the conviction that every believer was the spiritual equal of his brothers and sisters in Christ. The church’s worship, government and ministry, they felt, rested with the people. Among the spiritual descendants of these persecuted radicals are the Baptists.

Worship in Baptist churches stresses the responsibility and the participation of the whole congregation as believer-priests. The amount of participation varies from church to church. The frequent “amens” in many churches in the black communities and in the rural South stand in rather sharp contrast to the formal congregational responsive readings in other areas of the country. In either case, however, it is the people as a body expressing the reality of corporate worship.

For example, in a Baptist service of worship, the pastor leads in prayer; he does not pray. The difference assumes that all those present are praying while the pastor, or any other member for that matter, voices the thanksgiving, praise, and petitions of the congregation.

Most of the prayers offered in Baptist churches are unwritten and are voiced extemporaneously. Admittedly, such prayer is less likely to be the polished expression of the entire congregation than thoughtful prayers prepared beforehand, but the participation of laymen and the heartfelt concern of some individual can, and often does, lead a congregation into true worship.

Congregational singing is another way of expressing the role of the whole company of believers in the act of worship. The point is, Baptists are supposed to gather in the house of the Lord not as spectators but as participants.

Recent years have witnessed among Baptists a more carefully planned service of worship, especially on Sunday mornings. These services do not follow any single pattern, each church is free to work out its own order, but a rather typical service would be arranged in the following way:

- Call to Worship (spoken by the minister or sung by the choir)
- Invocation
- Hymn of Praise
- Responsive Reading (the minister and the congregation reading alternate verses, often of one of the Psalms)
- Pastoral Prayer
- Hymn of Dedication
- Offering of Gifts
- The Doxology
- Reading of the Scripture (Usually a passage upon which the sermon is based) Music by the choir
- Sermon
- Hymn of Invitation and Decision
- Benediction

Members of other denominations are often surprised by the omissions in such a service. They might expect to find Holy Communion, the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed.

The absence of communion is simply explained. Most Baptists do not follow the practice of weekly communion so we omitted it from a typical order of service. Baptists usually observe the Lord's Supper less often, monthly by some, quarterly by others, in the desire to avoid the contempt which comes with familiarity.

The Lord's Prayer is used in some Baptist churches but most use it only occasionally, if at all, in order to avoid meaningless repetition and to stress the privilege of believers to come to God freely and without formal aids. The absence of the Apostles' Creed in most Baptist churches is not due to the rejection of the beliefs expressed in the Creed. It is due, rather, to Baptists remembering that creeds have often been used as instruments of persecution to enforce a uniformity of doctrine. They want no part of religious coercion. They expect every believer to be free to state his own faith.

Thus, in the realm of worship we can see how Baptists seek to reflect the priesthood of every believer.

In church government also Baptists attempt to express the priesthood of believers. The spiritual dignity of every individual has led them to the congregational form of government where every member has an opportunity to share in the decision making of the church. In Baptist circles this freedom of a local church to determine its own destiny under God is called autonomy.

Too often, however, Baptists have interpreted autonomy to mean independence, and at times independence of an unchristian sort. Too many local churches live as a law unto themselves, ignoring their spiritual oneness with other churches in the household of God.

Baptists have also failed to live up to their own ideals in their denominational work. If the priesthood of the believer means the responsible participation of laymen in the affairs of the denomination, then Baptists need to recover their

own heritage. Representation at conventions and denominational meetings is often little more than a gathering of preachers.

Whatever the weaknesses in the expressions, however, the principle itself is a worthy one: every member of the church a functioning member. That is the priesthood in practice.

Perhaps the best way to see the distinctively biblical emphasis of the priesthood is to view it in terms of ministry. In a sense, a church's ministry is the church itself because every member of the church is meant to share in its ministry and mission. That is the point of the Pauline figure of the church as the body of Christ. All are not prophets or teachers or evangelists, but all minister or serve in some way.

In Ephesians 4:11-12 Paul speaks of the gifts granted to the Church by the ascended Christ. He mentions apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. These are given, he says, "for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." The construction of the sentence leaves the meaning doubtful. Do we have here a statement about the apostles and other leaders, with three subordinate phrases describing three separate functions that the apostles and other leaders are intended to fulfill? Or do we have a statement with three phrases that shows from stage to stage how the ministry widens in scope and power, from the apostles to every member?

The second understanding seems the more likely. If we leave out the commas which break the sentence (after all, these are not in the original language), we get the idea that the business of all true servants of Christ is to prepare the saints of every sort to take their part in the work of Christian service so that the whole body of Christ may be built up and made effective in the world. Every Christian a living church member and every church member a living participant in the ministry of Christ seems to be the ideal.

CHAPTER THREE: A CONGREGATION UNDER THE WORD OF GOD

The third biblical principle that throws light on the life of Baptists is the controlling influence of the Word of God. Traditionally Baptists have called this principle the supreme authority of Scripture in matters of faith and practice. The Bible itself, however, shows that the role of Scripture in the life of the church is intimately linked with what it calls the Word of God. What, then, does the Bible mean by the Word of God?

Throughout its pages the Bible tells us of a God who has communicated with men. Many people think of God as the force behind nature. Others identify Him with the highest expression of human sentiment. The God of the Bible, however, is an Almighty Person who lives and rules. When He wants to relate to men He acts and speaks. These events and words the Bible calls the Word of God because they are His way of disclosing who He is and what He does (Heb. 1:1-2). The Word of God, then, like any word spoken, is a way of revealing the One who speaks.

A Christian usually meets the Word of God first when he is converted. By some means, a personal conversation, a radio program, a pulpit message, a written leaflet, we hear of God's love for us revealed in Jesus' life, death and resurrection from the grave. This, we hear, is the answer to our feeling of guilt, or our senseless kind of existence. "Can this be what I need?" we ask. Then, after some debate within our soul, we say, "Yes, it is, Lord, I need Jesus as my Savior." And at that moment, by faith we hear the Word of God and are born anew.

That, as we have seen, is the heart of the Baptist understanding of the church. Viewed historically and experientially, the church is a company of people created and controlled by the truth that Jesus died and now lives to provide power for life in a new spiritual dimension. The initial experience of life by the Word of God then becomes the controlling authority for the people of God in corporate fellowship. "As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord," says Paul, "so live in him, rooted and built up in him" (Col. 2:6-7). The church must be shaped and guided by the Word of God.

When we reflect on this personal and corporate experience of the Word, we see what the Bible itself makes clear: God has expressed His Word in several ways. We may consider three of these here; the fourth one calls for special attention under the next biblical principle.

The first and preeminent expression of the Word of God is Jesus Christ himself, the Word of God incarnate. John tells us that the Word, who was with God in the beginning and who created all things, took human flesh (John 1:1, 14). So although "no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (John 1:18).

Jesus, then, is the Word, the revelation of God. And what an unimaginable Deity Jesus disclosed, a God concerned for the loveless, a self-effacing God willing to surrender life itself for men who deserved only death. Here, Baptists believe, in the man Jesus, was the embodiment of God in His fullness (Col. 2:9).

As the end of His earthly life drew near, however, Jesus taught His friends that it was not the end. It was a new beginning. "It is to your advantage that I go away," he said, "for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). He promised them His Spirit, whose task was to take "the things of Christ" and reveal them to the church (John 16:13-14). The Spirit, then, translates the life and power of the word made flesh into the forgiveness and victory of the Lord of the church. Once He gave His life for the church (Acts 20:28); now by His Spirit He rules within it.

Baptists believe that a fellowship under the authority of the Word means a church that recognizes the living presence of Jesus Christ in the midst of believers. John describes Him in Revelation as a glistening, awe-inspiring figure standing in the midst of the churches (symbolized by golden candlesticks). A two-edged sword issues from His mouth, probably a reference to the Word of God. When John saw Him, he fell at His feet as though dead. But Jesus laid his hand on John and said, "Fear not ... I am the living one, I died, and behold I am alive for evermore" (Rev. 1:17-18). That vision, a living Jesus in the midst of the churches, is not reserved for John alone. Baptists believe it is the measure of any church under the authority of the Word.

In bringing Jesus' life and power to a church the Spirit of God uses the message about Christ. This is the second expression of the Word of God. We call it the Word of God preached. "So faith," the Bible says, "comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17, KJV). This Word is the word of the gospel (Rom. 10:16) through which God has chosen to reveal Himself. We are born again, says Peter, "not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which lives and abides forever" (I Pet. 1:23, KJV).

We discover the special content of this message when we check the words the biblical writers use following the term. It is the "word of the Cross" (I Cor. 1:18, ASV), "the word of truth" (Col. 1:15, Eph. 1:13) and "the word of Christ" (Col. 3:16). In every case, however, it is the Word of God because through the message of the cross, the truth and Christ, God offers Himself to believers. This is the reason Baptists often refer to the gospel as the Word when they say, "That man really preaches the Word."

Baptists make much of preaching because they find the Bible makes much of preaching. We should not think of the pulpit alone, however, when the Scriptures speak of the importance of preaching. In the Bible preaching means announcing or proclaiming, and Christians can share the good news about Jesus in the streets or across the back fence. Any church that is under the authority of the Word of God will make preaching central everywhere, in the pulpit, from house to house, in the classroom, formally and informally, because "it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (I Cor. 1:21).

Beyond preaching, however, the Bible indicates that the Church is shaped and nurtured by the Word of God written, the third expression of the Word. Baptists use this phrase to refer to the Bible. The Scriptures, they contend, are essential to the preaching of Christ's death and resurrection.

The early church certainly felt that Christ's sacrifice and victory were grounded in the scriptures. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins *according to the scriptures*; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day *according to the scriptures*" (I Cor. 15:3-5 KJV). In a similar way a study of the early apostolic sermons in Acts will show that the appeal to Scripture was an essential part of the apostolic message. Peter's address on the day of Pentecost, for example, links the events of Calvary and Joseph's tomb to the promises of the Old Testament. Or consider how Paul in his sermon at Antioch of Pisidia found the resurrection mentioned in the second Psalm (Acts 13:33). In the eyes of the apostles the Scriptures were God's chosen instrument of man's salvation because their central message was Christ.

In a moving way John Wesley once expressed this view of the Bible: "I want to know one thing, the way to heaven ... God himself has condescended to teach the way ... He has written it down in a book. O give me that book: at any price give me the book of God." He was right. Baptists believe that preaching and teaching must be Bible-centered because God has chosen to speak through this book in a unique fashion.

In the past century, Baptists, like other major denominations, have experienced the shock waves of biblical criticism and the undertow of unbelief that usually follows them. In some quarters the Bible is no longer the standard for faith. Conflicts over views of the Bible have, in fact, divided the ranks of Baptists.

The majority of Baptists, however, recognize no higher court of appeal in matters of faith. The Bible is their basic text in their church classes and the source of the moral appeals from their pulpits.

This doctrinal and moral authority of Scripture arises from the unique place the Bible claims for itself. It clearly reflects the fact that it was written by men (Amos 1:1; Gal. 6:11; Luke 1:1-3). Anyone who will make the effort can discover differences of styles of writing and various emphases in the writer's messages. But Jesus and His apostles regarded these writing as more than products of men.

The Bible calls the special role that God had in the production of the Scriptures inspiration. What does it mean by the term? In ordinary conversation men may use the word to refer to an unusual creative ability which an artist or writer may have. But the term as applied to the Bible means a great deal more than this. Inspiration means that unique preparation, superintendence and influence of the Holy Spirit upon the biblical writers that enabled them to write what truthfully represented the mind of God. No other men in all of history have been used of God in just this way. When the Bible speaks of this action of God it calls it "bearing along" the inspired messenger ("moved" in II Pet. 1:21) so as to produce God-breathed writings (the "inspiration of God" in II Tim. 3:16). This is the Bible's

view of its own origin. The product so completely represented the intent of God that the apostles could equate the words of Scripture with the words of God (Acts 3:25; Rom. 9:15).

Because of its unique character and because of God's decision to use it, the Bible, Baptists insist, must be the supreme authority in their churches. All doctrine, practice, and life must be subject to the pronouncements of this Word. When the president of the United States speaks of national affairs, men pay attention because he speaks with political authority. When a great scientist speaks of radioactive fallout, men listen because he speaks with scientific authority. When God speaks through the Bible about salvation and the church, we must listen because God speaks with absolute authority. Opinions of men have no place. We must obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29). All creeds, confessions, ministers, and majority votes must be subject to the will of God revealed in Scripture.

We can see now how inseparably united are the Word of God and the church of God. The Word of God is Christ Himself (John 1:1) active in the churches, adding to them by the preaching of the gospel (I Pet. 1:23) and nourishing them by the Scriptures (II Tim. 3:15-17). He is the subject of the preached word, the gospel. He is the theme of the written word, the Bible. And He is the revealed Word, God Himself once manifested in flesh and now present by His Spirit as Lord of His church.

CHAPTER FOUR: PARTICIPANTS IN THE GOSPEL ORDINANCES

The immersion of the body in water strikes many people as a highly unusual religious ceremony. Many feel, therefore, that this fourth distinctive emphasis among Baptists believer's baptism lies on the mode of baptism. Baptism, however, is not primary. Both baptism and the Lord's Supper are derivative. Among Baptists their meaning depends on a prior conception of the church and the Word of God.

If, as Baptists believe, the church as designed by God is to be a fellowship of true disciples, then baptism into the fellowship of the church should be granted only to believers. Baptism in a church controlled and shaped by the Word must be an enactment of the gospel. That is what Baptists believe. They insist that only true believers, not infants, are proper candidates for baptism because the ceremony is a visible sermon about Christ's death and resurrection and the faith of the candidate in that message. The faith of parents or godparents will not suffice. Baptism is about death and resurrection and only those dead to self and alive in Christ should receive it.

In a similar way the Lord's Supper is a ceremony whose central theme is the gospel. It speaks of Jesus Christ's death and the hope of His coming again. It is a Supper therefore for family members, for those who have personal knowledge of Jesus as Savior. Both Christian ordinances, Baptists believe, are related to the proclamation of the Word of God in such a way that they must remain at the heart of the church's life.

Baptists commonly avoid the word *sacrament*, used by many Christians. Sacrament, they feel, has too often been associated with a priesthood claiming power to convert the bread and cup into the body and blood of Jesus. And even though historic Protestant denominations rejected this priesthood, they, nevertheless, retained the view that sacraments somehow communicate to the individual saving grace. To avoid such ideas, foreign to the New Testament, Baptists prefer the term *ordinance*.

Ordinance stresses the fact that baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordained by Jesus, as the Scriptures, in fact, testify (Matt. 28:19-20 and I Cor. 11:23-25). We should not assume, however, that the full meaning of these ceremonies lies in mere obedience to a command. They are also signs of the great saving realities of the Christian faith. Jesus promised to be with His people when they observed them (Matt. 28:19-20; I Cor. 10:16). The ordinances, then, are special events in the life of the church that look back to Christ's death and resurrection for our salvation, forward to our complete redemption and to the present prospect of communion with Him.

Since Baptists restrict church ordinances to those gospel-filled ceremonies commanded by Jesus, they practice only two of them, baptism and the Lord's Supper. The best way to understand how Baptists view them is to see them as the Word of God enacted. They are God's way of allowing believers to participate in the events of the gospel.

Strange as it may seem, Baptists have often treated baptism with indifference. In reacting to the claims of other people, they have often been so busy declaring what baptism is not, that they have neglected to make clear what it should be. Perhaps no one can fully understand the meaning of baptism as Jesus intended it. Certainly we cannot exhaust its meaning here, but if we consider it from its character as the gospel made visible, we find several prominent ideas.

Baptism is a symbolic expression of the gospel. Baptists, some have said, have no creed. In the sense of a written statement of doctrine to which all Baptists must subscribe, the statement is probably true. But they have sought to preserve baptism in its New Testament form and this has kept them close to the central themes of the faith.

Baptists believe the most fundamental truth depicted in the act of baptism is the spiritual union of the believer with the Lord Jesus in His death, burial, and resurrection. To be "in Christ" means to share spiritually in the saving acts of Jesus. The believer has died to his old life, his past is buried, and he has been raised with Christ to a new life under the Spirit's control (Rom. 6:3-4).

When Peter's hearers on the Day of Pentecost cried out, "What shall we do?" he told them to repent of their sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus. Then, he indicated that baptism speaks of forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:38). Baptism, he says in effect, symbolizes two spiritual realities: a believer's freedom from guilt,

because Jesus died; and his power for a new life, because Jesus was raised and sent His Spirit. Theologically, we can say baptism depicts justification by faith in Jesus' blood and sanctification by faith in the power of His resurrection life.

This confession in baptism is the chief reason Baptists insist that it be limited to believers. The New Testament consistently links baptism with repentance and faith. Since not one instance of the baptism of a baby can be found, Baptists maintain that the personal confession of faith must be central to the ceremony.

This confessional nature of baptism also helps to explain the Baptist insistence upon immersion as the proper way to baptize. The radical witness of New Testament baptism involves rejection of the pagan way of life and entrance into the Christian way. So decisive is this step that it can be compared only to death and rebirth (Rom. 6:1-4). A radical witness calls for a radical symbol. How, Baptists argue, can death, burial and resurrection be pictured by a few drops of water on the head?

Baptism is also the evidence of a moral cleansing. The link between the use of water and the experience of cleansing from sin is a natural one. "Arise, and be baptized," Ananias told Paul, "and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16, KJV). And later, Paul, in making a moral appeal to the Corinthians, reminds them that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God "and such were some of you. But you were washed" (I Cor. 6:11).

Baptism is not itself the means of cleansing; it is the sign of it. The cleansing that baptism expresses is moral and is a work of the Holy Spirit within a believer.

The baptism of a believer in water is, however, extremely important. Baptism as a public act takes the inward experience of cleansing and gives it concrete expression. What might appear to be a passing mood of the convert, a moment of excitement, becomes a public event that no changing emotion can afterward erase. Baptism thus lifts faith out of the uncertain sands of inward religious moods and roots it in an act of commitment and obedience. Faith, the convert learns, is not simply a private opinion; it is a life of discipleship in the will of God.

Finally, baptism is an act of initiation. Union with Christ means union with His people. Early Christians were familiar with the initiation ideas of Judaism, if not those of pagan religions, and they almost certainly considered baptism as the Christian initiation ceremony. Paul points in this direction when he writes, "By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body-Jews or Greeks, slaves or free" (I Cor. 12:13). Baptists, then, look upon baptism as the door of entrance into the local church. By means of it men and women are united in that local fellowship of those who love the Lord Jesus.

There is no indication in the New Testament that Jesus ordained that believers be baptized more than once. But he intended the Lord's Supper to be observed again and again. This fact reveals the major difference in the two ceremonies. Baptism is the ordinance that symbolizes the birth of the Christian; the Lord's Supper symbolizes his growth process. One pictures a decisive moment; the other a process of life.

As enacted Word, however, the ordinances are alike. Both depict the story of Jesus' death for our sins and power of a new life open to us by the power of His resurrection. This is why Baptists call them gospel ordinances.

As with baptism, so with the Lord's Supper. Baptists have often explained what it does not mean, without stating clearly what it does depict. They have often stressed that the Lord's Supper is not a sacrifice offered to God to atone for sin. They know that Christ alone "has *once* suffered for sins ... that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18, KJV), and that "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ *once for all*" (Heb. 10:10). The church, they contend, has no power in the Holy Communion to recreate or to represent the sacrifice of Jesus.

All this may be granted, but what, then, is the meaning of the Lord's Table? It is a saving message addressed to believers in visible form. What the gospel is to our ears, the Lord's Supper is to our eyes. It speaks of a past event, a present experience and a future hope.

The past event is the sacrifice of our Lord on Calvary and His triumph at the tomb. Although we do not want to forget anything else that He did, it is this that was central when He urged, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor.

11:26). The Supper is a sermon in action, the gospel in drama. Here every believer, regardless of gifts of speech, proclaims in a clear fashion the gospel of God's grace. Here Christ is publicly portrayed as crucified.

The Supper also symbolizes a covenant. "This cup," said Jesus "is the new covenant in my blood" (I Cor. 11:25). The old covenant was, of course, the unique relationship which God established with Israel during the Exodus and at Mount Sinai. Israel became God's special people by the blood of the sacrificed lamb and the power of His deliverance from the slavery of Egypt.

The Lord's Supper presents a new divine-human relationship, a way which writes no laws upon stones but love upon the heart. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:33). This is what Jeremiah envisioned but what Jesus established. The church is now God's special people, made His by Christ's blood and the Spirit's power.

Christians have often debated just how God is united with this people in Holy Communion. Those who say Christ is bodily present in the bread and wine go beyond the simple statements of the New Testament and attribute to Paul theological ideas of a later age. In I Corinthians 11:23-26 Paul makes no simple equation: bread equals body, wine equals blood. Instead of bread and wine, Paul's parallel is bread and cup. The notion of drinking blood would probably have been as repulsive to Paul as to any other Jew. Furthermore, the idea that in eating and drinking the elements he was consuming Christ, somehow really present, would have been equally distasteful.

No, Christ is present in the Supper not in the bread and wine but in His people as they gather to break the bread and drink from the cup. Their symbolic action is not simply a memory device but a way of making the past event of Christ's death present and real for the man of faith. In their meeting together in gospel memory and expectation, they have communion with Jesus Christ and with one another (I Cor. 10:16).

Perhaps the greatest abuse of the Supper among Baptists is the Corinthian abuse: failure to "discern the body." Under the impact of American individualism, many Baptists have come to think of communion in strictly personal terms. Many pastors contribute to this mood by stressing "let a man examine himself" as they lead in the serving of the elements. Paul's discussion of the proper conduct of the table in 1 Corinthians, however, shows clearly that "discerning the body" means recognizing that the saving events of the Supper, Christ's death, resurrection and coming are portrayed in the church. The Lord's Supper is supremely a corporate act, a family table, a participating body.

Failure to see this was the Corinthian sin. They turned their backs on the true meaning of the Supper when they failed to act out of love for their Christian brothers. Some began to eat before others arrived. Some gorged themselves while others went hungry (I Cor. 11:21). Such conduct, says Paul, is scandalous. Drunks at the Lord's Table! And even worse, drunks with a false sense of superiority and an indifference to the needs of brothers in Christ!

According to Paul, to attempt to celebrate the Lord's Supper without recognizing Christ in the midst of His church, binding it together in the love of God, is to eat and drink without "discerning the body." "Let a man examine himself" means, then, that the believer must live in the light of Christ's presence with His people. To love Christ is to love His people.

The final evidence that the Lord's Supper is a participation in the gospel is found in the note of hope. Paul told the Corinthians: "You proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (I Cor. 11:26). The apostle never thought of Christ's death apart from His resurrection; and resurrection to him spelled hope.

Some people seek a mood of sadness in the Supper remembering the Lord's death. Clearly, the observance is no lighthearted affair, but the shout of victory is there. Believers, therefore, should enter into the gladness and expectation of Christ's return. After all, the early Christians' cry, "Maranatha" - "Our Lord, Come" is also part of the new covenant.

CHAPTER FIVE: A SPIRITUAL DEMOCRACY AT WORK

The fifth biblical principle that helps to shape Baptist church life is usually called the autonomy of the local church. This is the way Baptists express their view of congregational church government. Because of the central role of the individual member in this form of government we might call it a spiritual democracy at work.

While on earth Jesus did not concern Himself greatly with the structure of His church. As long as He was physically present, He was the head of the little fellowship of believers. After His ascension the Holy Spirit came to guide the church in its development. Soon it had requirements for membership and recognized leaders. It met for worship centering in the Lord's Supper. It launched a program of missions. Other churches were established. And, beginning with the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15), a type of voluntary cooperation of the churches emerged.

Although the New Testament contains no detailed plans for the government of a church, it does lay down certain basic guidelines regarding the nature and mission of the church. The structure and form of a church arise from these fundamental principles.

Perhaps the most important of these truths for Baptists emerges from the way the New Testament uses the term *church*. The church is composed of human beings who make up the spiritual body of Christ. In some places, as in the letter to the Ephesians, this body is viewed universally, or in an all-inclusive sense. In the overwhelming majority of cases, however, church refers to a local fellowship of believers. The important point is that the church, whether considered universally or locally, is in its essential makeup the same. It is a community of believers in Christ. What matters most is the presence of Christ and that, humanly speaking, is conditioned by the faith and prayer of the believing community.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is a good example of this truth. "The body is one," he wrote to this strife-torn congregation, "and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (I Cor. 12:12,27).

From this passage and numbers of others, it is clear that a church does not find its unity in Christ through organizational ties with some earthly head or with a group of officials, but in a direct and vital relation to Christ Himself.

This means that the local fellowship is spiritually competent and as such it can justly fulfill church functions and responsibilities. This is what Baptists call the congregational principle in church government. The local church can, under Christ, exercise its own authority and regulate its own affairs. Within biblical guidelines it can determine its own membership, ordain its own ministers, and conduct its own worship. Baptists believe, therefore, that no outside body, however influential, can impose on a church even the smallest decision that the congregation does not accept as God's will.

In practice spiritual democracy means that a church's government is the direct responsibility of the congregation. If every true church of Christ is endowed with the gifts of the Spirit necessary for its life and ministry in Jesus' name, then authority for that church is placed in the membership as a whole. No individual or group of individuals within the church or in a denominational body outside can make decisions for, or exercise jurisdiction over, the church.

This type of congregational democracy demands regular gatherings of the church in business meetings. Many Baptists prefer to call them church meetings in order to stress the functioning of the church body. But under whatever name, in Baptist churches members discuss matters freely, even debate them, and reach their decisions by voting.

This authority granted by Christ embraces three major areas of the church's life: its membership, its ministry, and its relationships with other Christian groups.

Baptists contend that the basis of membership in a church is salvation in Christ and baptism by immersion on the authority of New Testament example and command. A convert confesses his faith by baptism prior to joining the

church. Baptists, however, also receive members by transfer of membership from other Baptist churches, or, by a statement of personal experience of believer's baptism, if a letter transferring membership cannot be secured. But whatever means a person may use to apply for membership, the decision of whether or not he is received rests with the church. Traditionally, Baptists have exercised this responsibility for accepting members into the church by voting on each of them in a congregational meeting.

Baptists hold that this responsibility for membership includes not only receiving members but also instructing and disciplining them. The church, like a believing father, is obligated to bring up members in the instruction and discipline of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). Nurture in the Word of God is the positive part of church experience. Correction is the negative part.

With their heavy reliance upon revivals, Baptists in America have tended to neglect the positive part of church membership. They have often failed to teach a new Christian the benefits and obligations of a vital experience in a congregation. As a result many church rolls are filled with inactive and unproductive members. Hundreds of local churches could move toward spiritual renewal by offering converts help in interpreting their experience and explaining the meaning of church membership.

Jesus, aware of the power of sin and desiring to keep His church free of serious impurity, gave the steps to follow in dealing with disobedient members (Matt. 18:15-17). The New Testament makes clear, however, that the primary purpose of church discipline is to seek the correction and spiritual welfare of the offending member so that a united congregation will reflect the transforming power of the gospel of Christ (Rom. 16:17; I Cor. 5:9-13).

Baptist history offers abundant evidence of the seriousness with which earlier generations of Christians sought to follow Christ in this responsibility. More recent years, however, have found many Baptist churches resorting to the practice of quietly dropping inactive members from church rolls. The desire to avoid embarrassing persons has probably contributed to this policy. But no church can shirk indefinitely responsibility for its own membership. A body that is unable to overcome infection will in time die.

A second major area in which the congregation is actively responsible to Christ is the nature of its ministry. Baptist churches vary in size from less than fifty to several thousand members. They meet in buildings ranging from one room to over a hundred. Some are at country crossroads, others are located alongside Statehouses in major cities. Who is to say what style of ministry is appropriate for each of these? Only the congregation, by means of its democratic process. Denominational leaders may offer assistance but Baptists believe that it is within the competence of the congregation to determine the times, the structure, and the manner of its worship; the types of evangelism appropriate for its community and its character as a Christian fellowship; the programs for the Christian education of its members; and the ways it is to serve men without a personal knowledge of Christ.

A person does not really understand Baptists until he has attended one of their congregational meetings. In former times, they would gather during a special afternoon for conference and fellowship. Today, church meetings are usually combined with a scheduled Wednesday evening service. Here the church elects its officers for the year, adopts its budget, accepts new members, and receives the reports of committees. The order is democratic, each member is free to speak his mind and then vote on the issue.

No guarantees of truth are built into this working democracy. Baptists know that majorities are not always right. But after prayer for the Lord's direction, they act in the confidence that the humblest member has the Spirit of God and that his judgment is important for the body.

In practice Baptist churches assign many responsibilities to the pastor, the deacons, and committees. Details of institutional housekeeping such as building maintenance and the programming of activities are handled by small groups; then, by using recommendations of boards and committees, church meetings can be limited to decisions of basic policy matters touching worship, witness, instruction and service.

In some respects the most important decision a Baptist congregation makes is the one ordaining or calling a minister.

In the primary sense the ministry of the church, as we have seen, consists of the entire membership, since every member who is truly a part of the church has some gift to exercise for the benefit of the body. Teaching the Word,

visiting the sick, comforting the sorrowing, entertaining the stranger and a host of other activities can be ministries rendered in Jesus' name. In this primary sense every member is a minister.

In the narrow sense, however, the ministry consists of certain leaders who are called by God and recognized by the church for special service. Seeking to follow the New Testament example, Baptists call pastors and deacons to these leadership roles. In the book of Acts the apostles urged the Jerusalem church to select seven men who could assume the duties of distributing to the needs of widows so that they, the apostles, could give their attention to the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:1-7). Most Baptists regard this as the first instance of the office of deacon, though the title is not used of the seven men chosen. In the first letter to Timothy, however, Paul gives clear directions for the selection of deacons, as well as bishops or pastors (I Tim. 1:1-13).

The office of deacon in Baptist churches is not a preliminary stage of training before entrance into a higher ministry as it is in some churches. It is a full ministry in itself, though usually not a call to a lifetime service.

The deacons often form an advisory council to work with the pastor (or pastors) in providing leadership for the church's total ministry. Traditionally they also assist the pastor in the administration of the Lord's Supper and are responsible for the church's charitable work.

Some Baptist churches ordain their deacons but many reserve ordination for pastors or other ministers called to a lifetime service. Missionaries, military chaplains, and theological professors would be examples of the extension of the pastoral role. In any case, Baptists have maintained that ordained leadership is to an office, not to a status. The ordination of a man to the ministry does not give him special powers unavailable to his fellow Christians. Ordination is simply the church's recognition of a divine call to a particular ministry in the church and of the gifts needed for the fulfillment of that call.

The function of a minister in a Baptist church may vary, depending upon the abilities of the man and the needs of the church. His basic duties, however, include preaching, conducting public worship, ministering to the sick and seeking the unchurched in the community.

The multiplication of ministerial duties in our society has led many churches to a multiple ministry. Larger Baptist churches often have ministers of education, of youth, of visitation or of music. In whatever role, however, it is necessary for a minister, while remaining responsible to the congregation, to have a measure of authority delegated to him by the church. Without it he cannot exercise proper leadership.

The final area in which the local church must exercise its responsibility is in deciding how and to what extent it will participate in the life of the church at large. No law requires a Baptist congregation to establish ties with others. But an independent church is a contradiction because it is a denial of the unity of the Spirit and a confession of blindness to the cause of Christ.

Paul, who stressed so often the integrity of the local church, was careful to counteract any tendency toward isolation of those churches he helped to establish. The letter that contains most evidence of this is I Corinthians. He sounds the keynote against independency in his opening greeting: "Paul ... to the church of God which is at Corinth ... called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Having placed the fundamental teaching before the Corinthians, Paul repeatedly applies it to practical matters in the letter. The problem of allowing unveiled women to pray in public is a good example. He condemns the Corinthian practice by referring to the practices of other churches. We recognize no such practice, he says, "nor do the churches of God" (I Cor. 11:16). Clearly, Paul expected the Corinthian congregation to bear in mind appropriate Christian practice elsewhere.

Baptists have expressed this biblical principle by joining in associations of churches, missionary societies, and denominational conventions. In a sense, then, an independent Baptist church is a denial of Baptist heritage and biblical principle. The vast majority of Baptists have exercised their congregational responsibility by agreeing to enter into the fellowship and mission of God's people throughout the earth, whether they bear the Baptist name or another.

CHAPTER SIX: A FREE CHURCH IN A FREE STATE

“God alone,” Baptists have often affirmed, “is the Lord of the consciences of men.” This is their way of underscoring their sixth biblical principle, religious liberty. So great has been their support of freedom that some students of their history claim that religious liberty is their greatest contribution to modern life. Certainly it is an integral part of their vision of churches controlled by the gospel.

The freedom Baptists have so persistently sought is liberty to profess a faith different from that of the dominant religion and to unite in public worship with others who share this faith. This kind of freedom must be distinguished from toleration of religious differences. Toleration has many degrees. It may be granted to certain Christian sects; to all Christian sects, but to no other religion; to all religious groups but not to atheists, and so on. Toleration, we might say, is incomplete religious liberty.

Baptists have never been content with mere toleration because it presumes to grant something that is not rightfully due. Out of a spirit of generosity toleration, from a position of superiority, grants a privilege to an inferior. Religious liberty, however, insists that there are no superior or inferior persons. Before the law all are equally free.

Religious liberty, we should stress, says nothing about the truth of positions in God’s sight. Being a political provision, it is not concerned with questions of religious truth; it only guarantees the opportunity to every man to seek the truth and to assemble with others in quest of it.

Christians, then, holding that God has revealed to man divine truth concerning his salvation, will distinguish what is right before the law and what is true before God. Religious liberty is simply the political context that allows a man to make his choice for or against Jesus Christ under nothing more than moral constraint.

This view is so widely accepted today that most Americans think it strange that it was ever denied a person. For centuries, however, men believed firmly that religious liberty would only lead to social and political chaos. Religion, and at times the Christian religion, served as a kind of social cement binding empires or states together, and persecution of dissenting minorities was accepted as normal and right. Even the Protestant Reformers considered religious liberty a threat to a stable society. It fell to the Anabaptists on the European continent and to the Baptists in England to assert the rights of every man to think and believe according to his own conscience.

Baptists demanded religious liberty not only for themselves but also for others, even those whom they regarded as terribly mistaken in their religious views. Thomas Helwys’ book, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, one of the earliest pleas for full religious liberty to appear in England, is typical. A disciple of John Smyth, probably the first modern Baptist, Helwys separated from Smyth and returned to England from Amsterdam to be the leader of the first Baptist church on English soil. This was in 1612, outside the walls of London. In the same year Helwys issued his book, dedicated to James I. “The king,” he reminded James, “is a mortal man and not God, and therefore hath no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual lords over them; he is but dust and ashes as well as we; yet, though he should kill us, we will speak the truth to him ... If the king’s people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more; for men’s religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the king shall not answer for it, neither may the king be judge between God and man; let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.”

James accepted this challenge to his divine right and threw Helwys into prison where he remained until he died. His testimony to religious freedom, however, lives on.

The basis of religious liberty, Baptists have often insisted, rests on the New Testament. They do not begin with man as a creature enlightened by reason and able therefore to take his place in a society where intelligent persons concede to others the rights of free discussion. They begin with man as we see him in terms of Jesus Christ and the gospel.

In the New Testament man is a being of infinite worth, with rights of personality conferred upon him by God. He is not a thing, a pawn in some politician's game, a cog in an industrial machine, or a number in a computer controlled state. He is a man, God created and God redeemed, and therefore he must be respected by other men and the state.

Christ, as the Gospels disclose, assumed that man was free to choose his destiny, but He preached that freedom guaranteed by faith in Him. While man in one sense can be called a free being, in another sense he must experience the liberating power of the gospel before he can find "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). The final freedom is from sin and death and hell, but in order to make the decision to follow Christ, man must be free from external constraints, from religious states and state religions. That is how gospel freedom requires religious freedom.

The Baptist case for religious freedom also arises from their view of the church and the state. The church, to Baptists, must be a fellowship of believers who have personally and freely responded to the gospel invitation. A true family of God simply cannot be created by force. Only a society, therefore, that allows men to decide freely to follow Christ is in harmony with the purposes of the gospel.

In spite of their success in democratic America, Baptists are not committed to any single theory of government or political philosophy. Baptists in the United States may argue that a democratic form of government is particularly compatible with their stress upon freedom and the worth of the individual. But Baptists in other parts of the world may be equally convinced that a monarchy or aristocracy offers the best government.

The main point is not the form of government but the way it functions regarding religion. Baptists insist that the state and the church have two different responsibilities and two different kinds of authority. Each must seek to achieve the ends which it desires by the means proper to itself. When the state acts as an agent for religious purposes or the church acts as an agent for state purposes, uniformity is gained at the price of liberty.

This is the background of the Baptist support of separation of church and state. Their goal is a free church in a free state. Baptists recognize, of course, that an absolute separation of church and state is unrealistic. This would be possible only if the church existed in a realm where the government never functioned. But churches, they know, enjoy police and fire protection; their meeting places are subject to regulations of building codes; and they may be sued in civil courts.

By separation of church and state Baptists mean that the government should exercise its authority only in civil affairs, not in religious matters. And, on the other hand, they mean that no religion ought to be established by legal grants, advantages or privileges from the government.

To speak of a specific, Baptists hold that none of the tax money collected from people of every religion and from those of no religion is to be used for a religious project. Those who find no harm in the use of public funds for worthy church activities may argue that use of tax money is a long way from religious persecution. But is it? Use of tax money for religious purposes compels the taxpayer to support religious instruction that he cannot conscientiously approve. To this extent it is a form of coercion in the realm of religion.

This view has cost certain Baptist institutions dearly. In recent years administrators of Baptist colleges have felt the crunch of rising costs on the one hand and the refusal of Baptist bodies to accept government aid on the other.

In many other cases Baptists have yet to work out the implications of their principles of separation of church and state. The constitutional guarantees of religious liberty simply do not solve all the problems related to religion and government. The tasks of educating the young, caring for the sick, ministering to the needs of military personnel, and providing for welfare of the needy are matters of common concern. Baptists cannot retreat from their spiritual responsibilities. Nor can they afford to solve these problems with the argument "everybody else is doing it." They did not at first support religious liberty because it was popular or because it offered some short-term gain. It would be a tragedy of the first order if this generation of Baptists surrendered fundamental principle for some momentary advantage. The price of freedom continues to be eternal vigilance and a good deal of hard work.

These then, are the Baptist insights into the church and its mission in the world. Baptists do not hold these truths because they are traditional. They affirm them because they believe they are biblical.

Baptists recognize, of course, that equally dedicated Christians hold other views and they, like Paul, rejoice as long as Christ is proclaimed (Phil. 1:18). Baptists know that the heated debates over denominational distinctives that once excited our grandfathers have cooled. But they also know that the questions of identity and self understanding remain for pastors and Christian educators.

Members of any religious group need to know who they are and what their purposes are. To be confused about one's identity is as demoralizing for a group as it is for an individual.

Baptists, then, until their beliefs prove to be without foundation in Scripture, will very likely continue in the same spirit of faith as he who wrote, "I believed, and so I spoke (II Cor. 4:13).