

Still a Baptist

Pastor Paul Chappell
Lancaster Baptist Church

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This month I will celebrate my fortieth year being ordained as a Baptist pastor. No one could have prepared me for the changes that were ahead in the church and ministerial landscape over this forty-year period.

I was raised as a Baptist and trained to be a Baptist preacher. While I believe there has been a succession of truth passed down through the ages, I have not found a line of church succession named “Baptist” that is identifiable every week of world history. I do believe, however, that churches whose doctrine of salvation and mode of baptism is scriptural have always existed since the time of Christ. And I believe that today those doctrinal distinctives are found in biblical Baptist churches.

I don’t believe in a “Baptist Bride” position that only the churches which can trace their succession to the time of Christ are legitimate or that only the people who are members of such churches are part of the bride of Christ referred to in Ephesians 5:25–27. I have friends who are not Baptist and who are wonderful Christians.

One of the Baptist distinctives is individual soul liberty. I believe every Christian must make doctrinal decisions based on his or her understanding of the Word of God. Even this article is not written to force my convictions on you. It is written to challenge your thought processes, especially if you are a Baptist pastor.

I am not a denominational Baptist. Most large Baptist denominations have struggled and compromised in recent decades over a variety of important issues, including the inerrancy of Scripture, creation, alcohol, women pastors, and ordaining gay clergy. I am happy to not be a part of such groups and have identified throughout my whole ministry as autonomous, or independent, of Baptist denominations.

Yet, I’m still a Baptist—and I am one by conviction. As I see Baptist pastors distance themselves from the name Baptist or young men who were, like me, saved and trained in Baptist churches claim that the name Baptist is unimportant, I have concerns. I invite you to think through some of these with me.

Why Some Baptists Discard the Name

I do believe there is a thought process a man who is trained as a Baptist but chooses to minimize or entirely shed the name works through. I’m just not convinced it is the right process.

Sometimes it is a marketing decision.

I get the fact that we want to present our church in brochures and on our websites and social media as something appealing. We don't want to seem negative. Good marketers remove the "distasteful" aspects of their products. So, in following the marketing logic, many pastors remove the name Baptist.

But it's worth asking the question: who are you winning when you do this? It's probably not unsaved people, who often don't understand or care about the differences between Baptist or non-denominational anyway.

I have found maintaining our historic and biblical identity helpful to our church family. If we lose potential members from different denominational backgrounds in that process, we likely have gained a good spirit in the church, maintained doctrinal purity, and attracted people who appreciate or become disciplined in our doctrinal convictions.

I don't want people to visit our ministry websites or social media or to even drive by our church without knowing we are unashamedly a Baptist church.

Sometimes it is a perceived stigma.

Some who withdraw from the name Baptist do so because a mentor who strongly identified as a Baptist sullied the name to them—perhaps through moral failure or a mean spirit or just plain weirdness. So now this disillusioned pastor wants to remove everything from his past.

Although each pastor and church will certainly have stylistic variances from the previous generation or from where they were trained, someone who is hurt by the past or believes there is a stigma to his heritage may take more pronounced steps to cast off any similarities to his recent predecessors. This is usually not just one thing, but is often a combination of things, including a distaste for having leadership requirements in the church, turning to more trendy cultural alignments, and avoiding strong doctrinal positions in preaching. I was recently talking with a pastor who is working through some of these issues, and I happened to call him "brother." He responded, "Don't call me brother; that's the way I used to talk."

The problem with this kind of reactionary thinking is that focusing on doing things differently than your past means that your experiences, rather than God's Word, becomes the standard for how you operate.

And speaking of God's Word, Ephesians 6:21 says, "But that ye also may know my affairs, and how I do, Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, shall make known to you all things." (Sorry, brother, I couldn't resist.)

Of course, shedding the name Baptist because of its stigma is not always because of hurts of the past. Sometimes it is just the concern that the public at large looks down on Baptists as being narrow-minded, out of touch, or mean-spirited. There is definitely a negative stereotype media portrayal of born again Christians, and sometimes Baptists, along these lines. And the truth is that there is a stigma to the name Baptist. But there is also a stigma to words like church and

Bible.

But is removing the name the right answer?

What the Name Baptist Means

When considering words of identification, it's good to know what those words represent. In the case of the word Baptist, there is a rich heritage and biblical identification that I do not see in any other single word. Identifying as a Baptist encompasses a biblical position and historic identity. At our church, we teach this in our new members class and emphasize it to our church family.

Biblical distinctives

I like to use the acrostic with the word BAPTISTS to explain the Baptist distinctives to new Christians. I explain that although there are non-baptist churches that hold some of these beliefs, the eight of these as a whole is what sets Baptist churches apart from others; they are what makes us distinct.

Biblical authority in all matters of faith and practice: We believe the Bible is inspired and infallible and is the final authority. It is from God's Word that we understand and teach the fundamental doctrines of our faith as well as pattern our church polity. (See 2 Timothy 3:16; John 17:17; Acts 17:11; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Peter 1:20–21.)

Autonomy or self governing power of the local church: We believe that every local church should be independent of a hierarchical framework or outside governmental structure. (See Colossians 1:18; Acts 13–14, 20:19–30; Ephesians 1:22–23.)

Priesthood of believers: God's Word assures believers that we have direct access to God through our relationship with Christ. We believe and teach that the priesthood of the believer is the unspeakably precious privilege of every child of God. (See Hebrews 4:14–16; 1 Timothy 2:5–6; 1 Peter 2:5–10.)

Two offices within the church: Scripture only mentions two church offices—pastor (also referred to as elder or bishop) and deacon. These two offices are to be filled by godly men of integrity in each local church. (See Philippians 1:1; Acts 6:1–7; 1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:6–9; 1 Peter 5:1–4.)

Individual soul liberty: We believe that each person must make a personal decision of repentance and faith in Christ. (See Romans 10:9–17, 14:1–23.) Parents do not make this decision for their children, and the government cannot make it for its people. Additionally, each person is responsible before God in matters of holiness and conscience.

Separation of church and state: The state should have no power to intervene in the free expression of religious liberty. (See Matthew 22:21; Acts 5:29–31; Romans 13:1–4.)

Two ordinances—baptism and the Lord’s Table: These ordinances have no part in salvation and only serve as pictures of what Christ did for us. (See Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; Acts 2:38–43, 8:36–38; Romans 6:1–6)

Separation and personal holiness: We believe that Christ’s ultimate sacrifice demands our complete consecration, and we desire that our daily living would reflect the holiness of our great God. (See 2 Corinthians 6:14; 1 Peter 1:16.)

We could list more, such as believers’ baptism by immersion and the church as a body of saved, baptized believers. But ultimately these and others are embedded in the distinctions listed above.

Historic identity

The history of those who have held Baptist convictions is a history of choosing to suffer for Christ over enjoying the favor of men. Whether at the hands of oppressive emperors or under the Roman Catholic Church or even from the Reformers themselves, Baptists have stood courageously through persecution for their biblical convictions.

I think of Felix Manz in Switzerland who preached salvation by grace alone followed by believers’ baptism for church membership. (This was in contrast to the Reformers who were teaching salvation by grace but church membership by infant sprinkling.) For his convictions on baptism and church membership, Manz was imprisoned multiple times and—because he kept preaching it and planting churches across Switzerland—was ultimately executed by drowning. I’ve stood on the shore of the River Limmat where his mother and brother watched him taken out to the middle of the river for his execution.

I think, too, of the whole congregation of the earliest Baptist church in Wales. Established in 1649, it was originally located in the town of Ilston but soon relocated to nearby Swansea. John Myles served as the first pastor, until he, along with several members from the church, fled persecution by immigrating to the American colonies. They ended up in Massachusetts where the same group established a Baptist church in 1663—the earliest Baptist church in the state. The town of Swansea, Massachusetts was named after this church’s hometown in Wales. True to Baptist beliefs of individual soul liberty, the town was one of the first towns in New England founded on the premise of religious liberty for all.

We are all aware that, as rich as our history is, there have been those who claimed the name Baptist but we wished they wouldn’t have! I have been clear with our church family over the years to state our disagreement with Baptists whose doctrine was false, such as Westboro Baptist, or whose spirit or ministry philosophy is toxic. But we have not allowed these exceptions to drive us away from our true heritage.

Functional implications

Remaining a Baptist is more than keeping the word on your church sign. I have always believed that having a Baptist church means having a church of Baptist people.

I remember back when we were averaging under fifty people in attendance and needed a pianist. A dear family visited our church, and the wife was an excellent piano player. They were saved but had previously been baptized in a church that taught a non-biblical view of “speaking in tongues” and that this was the evidence of salvation as well as that one could lose their salvation. Our belief about baptism is that the mode is immersion, the order is after salvation, and the authority to baptize rests in a church of biblical doctrine. (This is the historic Baptist position.) Thus, we encouraged this family that if they believed the doctrinal statement of our church, they should consider being baptized to identify with Christ and be added to our church. They chose not to be baptized in a Baptist church. We lost a pianist but kept our conviction. Had we filled our church with people of different doctrines and practices, we would today be more of an interdenominational church.

Another practical aspect of remaining a Baptist church is following biblical teaching regarding the Lord’s Table. First Corinthians 11 makes it clear that observing the Lord’s Table was required, not optional, for the members of the Corinthian church. And the context of 1 Corinthians is clear that the Lord’s Table is for a saved, baptized body of believers: “Unto the church of God which is at Corinth...” (1 Corinthians 1:2). It may seem easier, maybe even more polite, to let an unsaved person take the elements, but it is not scriptural.

Church polity is another practical distinction of a Baptist church. Baptists are not elder ruled in the sense of a small group choosing the next pastor. In fact, the most congregational decision of a Baptist church is the election of pastors and deacons. We see this in Acts 6 in the verbiage, “Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men...” (Acts 6:3). In the pastoral epistles of Timothy and Titus, we see that pastors lead the daily ministries of the church, working with deacons. In Ephesians 4:11–12, we see pastors are to equip the entire congregation for “the work of the ministry.”

Additional Considerations

So where does this leave a Baptist pastor thinking through whether being a Baptist is an asset or a liability? Here are a few thoughts to keep in mind.

The pressure on young Pastors to “succeed” is real.

Our human nature desires the acceptance of others and the affirmation of numeric growth.

It was probably easier to be a Baptist in America fifty years ago when many large and influential churches were Baptist.

While there are still thousands of strong Baptist churches, the pressure to attract a crowd is great. And sometimes the quickest path to do that is by not taking a clear doctrinal stand.

But there is a ripple effect to this. When one church planter or pastor changes his polity, doctrine, or stand, he quickly encourages others to consider the same path. Seminars are conducted and books are written on how to transition away from the perceived stigma mentioned above. Guys

are on social media every day or at meetings encouraging one another in each other's transition from their Baptist heritage.

Pragmatism is prevalent.

I remember being asked by prominent people in our community if the name Baptist was necessary. No doubt we lost some donations because we kept the name. However, God has provided and has enabled our church to build a large campus as we have grown numerically and to be a leader in missions giving within the Baptist world for many years.

I decided forty years ago I wasn't going to market the church identity away to hopefully get some other denominational people to join. Some good Christian people did this in other eras. For instance, the Christian & Missionary Alliance was built on this philosophy. (It began as two parachurch organizations focused on outreach and missions and eventually morphed into a denomination.) But those were different days when some sound truth was to be found in various types of churches. I still would not have participated in such a movement then, but I especially would not today as the ecumenical trend of our day downplays vital doctrines and clear biblical practices.

Rarely does a pragmatic pastor change just one major tenant of faith or distinctive. Usually there is a domino effect that follows as more beliefs become "non-essentials."

Some of the men who downplay the name Baptist have enough theological grounding to reject liberal doctrine and woke ideology with its false teachings of social justice and anti-family dogma. But many of these pastors have adapted a type of virtue signaling by removing the name Baptist or even doctrinal terms like atonement, sin, judgment, hell, or anything that might seem offensive to unsaved people.

This idea of being relevant by downplaying truth was introduced in my lifetime in the seeker-sensitive movement forty years ago. This movement has had an impact on every group—Baptist and others.

I remember thinking that being relatable was going to be key for me in growing a church in Southern California. Thankfully, a pastor preached a message that offended me. But the message also reminded me that being culturally sensitive is not as important as being Christ sensitive. (I eventually wrote a little book *The Saviour-Sensitive Church* on this thought. Also, this experience in my life has emphasized the need to lovingly pray for and purposefully dialog with pastors who are tempted to make unnecessary changes.)

Most unsaved people don't know the difference between the name Baptist and any other label. I've always focused on reaching unsaved people rather than attracting people from other churches. In fact, it is interesting to me that while many in the seeker philosophy advocate dropping one's distinctive identity in order to reach the lost, at a second look, it appears they are trying to reach a broader number of people from various church backgrounds.

A pastor needs to be careful of trying to accommodate every person. Decision making based on “not wanting to offend everyone” is not leadership. This type of philosophy has led American churches into wokism and a low view of Scripture.

I still believe in the importance of making our message understandable. To that end, I employ methods like using projection on screens while I preach to show maps or pictures. I also believe there is value to making our message relatable. We try to use tracts with attractive graphics and think through what our church posts on social media. There is no reason to be sloppy, outdated, or mean spirited in conveying our message. Even so, relatability is not the goal. It is only part of keeping the message understandable.

Two illustrations of this are Peter and Paul as they preached the gospel in two different settings. When Peter preached in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), he knew that his audience already understood monotheistic religion and looked for a Messiah. Thus, most of his message was simply pointing them to Christ as their Messiah. On the other hand, when Paul preached to the Greeks in Athens (Acts 17), he spoke of the many false gods and used illustrations and quotes from their culture in his message. Yet, Peter and Paul both related to their audience, and neither of them adapted or compromised the message itself in order to have a stronger appeal.

An effective preacher longs for people to understand truth, but he does not water down truth so as to seem relevant. Making the message understandable is important; changing the message to make it palatable is wrong.

The incremental changes pastors make today will be made in excess by the next generation. There is always a tendency to push things further along in the direction in which they are already headed. So when a pastor leans into a direction away from his heritage, those coming up in his ministry tend to take further steps in the same direction.

The likelihood of young men who grow up in a church that has relegated the identification of Baptist to a non-essential becoming Baptist pastors themselves is not strong. Young people in these churches who have a heart for things of the Lord tend to have more excitement about graphics and the presentation aspects of ministry than the desire to personally declare the gospel. I believe we send a dangerous message when we change our emphasis from doctrine and preaching to relevancy and excitement.

Dropping distinctives is not necessary for growth.

Thirty-seven years ago, the Lord brought Terrie and me to a dwindling congregation of about twelve at Lancaster Baptist Church. In those early years, I made repeated decisions to take bold stands for truth and to teach the Baptist distinctives of our church while at the same time passionately and strategically saturating our community with the gospel. For eighteen months, I knocked on five hundred doors per week in my personal soulwinning in addition to training our church family Thursday nights and Saturday mornings on how to share the gospel. The Lord blessed those efforts, and for the past thirty-two years now, I have pastored what some call a “mega church.” And all of this happened in Los Angeles County, California.

I have found that God honors His Word and that people appreciate a pastor who is not given to change. I believe the strongest churches in history have had strong commitments to truth.

Do not believe those who tell you that dropping your distinctives is necessary to reach people. Our church today has the same doctrinal stand and convictions that it did when it was running twenty in attendance.

Does the Name Baptist Really Matter?

Yes, there is something to a name.

Most parents check the meaning of a name before they give it to their children. And all decent parents want their children to value and uphold their family name.

We live in a day when society is forcing the change of traditional terms. Usually, there is an anti-God and anti-family agenda behind that.

While it is true that there are a variety of terms or nomenclature that can be adjusted for sake of clarity (Sunday school or small groups mean the same thing), there are some names that matter. In the case of the name Baptist, I have chosen to identify with the truth it represents and the people who died to pass it down.

And forty years later, I am thankful to still be a Baptist.