



# Why I am Baptist

*A personal perspective by Daniel Vestal*



**I** want to be careful in defining myself as a Baptist simply by involvement in a denominational-type of organization.

*When I say I am a Baptist, I'm not saying I'm a Convention Baptist. Will Campbell once wrote "The SBC is more Southern than it is Baptist and it is more Baptist than it is Christian."*

I must confess there was a time when I thought that to be a Baptist and to be a Southern Baptist were the same thing. I no longer feel that way. Also, when I say I am a Baptist, I am not saying I'm a *cultural Baptist*. I know some folks who say, "I am a Texas Baptist," meaning they identify with the culture of the frontier, espouse rugged individualism, have a "bigger is better" mentality, like great institutions, large churches with large programs and large budgets. That's a wonderful

culture, but don't equate that culture with being Baptist. Likewise, I know some folks who love to say, "I am a Virginia Baptist," meaning that they identify with a genteel culture or a treasured tradition with education that produces a gentleman pastor and more formal liturgy in worship. Again, that's a wonderful culture, but don't equate it with being Baptist. I know some other folks who call themselves Bible-believing Baptists, and by that they mean they "don't drink, don't chew and don't go with girls who do." It is a culture of negativism, rules and strict behavioral patterns. Don't equate that culture with being Baptist.

Instead, I have come to identify myself as a *convictional Baptist*, a Christian who expresses faith and lives life compelled and convicted by certain principles that Baptists have championed. These biblical ideas have captured me. I am passionate about them. I am surely not the first person to be passionate about them. In fact, one of the benefits of studying history is to see how individuals before me in very different circumstances came to these convictions, how they

loved them, expressed them and, in some instances, died for them.

Also, one of the benefits of traveling is to discover how individuals around the world have come to convictions about these values and, in very different cultures and circumstances, seek to live by them. The Baptist movement is a global one. If one studies its rich history, one discovers a movement that has resulted in the starting of thousands of churches, the founding of hundreds of colleges, the sending of missionaries, and the support of all kinds of benevolent ministries.

## I am a Baptist because I believe in a non-hierarchical approach to doing church.

**J**ust a few months ago, I was in Europe for the Jubilee Celebration of the European Baptist Federation. EBF

is made up of fifty Baptist unions in Europe, many of them very small and struggling under a state church. One afternoon, I was visiting with Malkhaz Songulashvili, the general secretary of the Baptist Union in Georgia and pastor of the largest Baptist church in that country. Out of a population of five million, there are five thousand Baptists. This young Baptist is a brilliant linguist, a studied theologian and an ardent missionary. He began to talk about the difference between an Orthodox Christian in Georgia and a Baptist Christian. He expressed deep appreciation and indebtedness toward Orthodoxy for its development of trinitarian theology, Christological confessions, and a sense of mystery in worship. But then he said, with his eyes flashing, “It is in the doctrine of the church and the life of the ordinary Christian that the Baptist witness is so important.”

In Orthodoxy, the hierarchical character of the church diminishes personal faith and individual responsibility. There is a vertical structure with authority and status

from top to bottom:

- Patriarch
- Metropolitan
- Archbishop
- Bishop
- Archmandrit
- Protopresbyter
- Dean
- Priest
- Archdeacon
- Deacon
- Reader
- Member

In contrast, Baptists have championed the idea that every person is a priest before God. The church is not where the bishops gather, but where two or three gather in the name of Jesus. There are no intermediaries between God and the individual. Every person can open Scripture and listen to the voice of the Spirit.

Now, this idea may seem “old hat” to us in the USA, but I can tell you that this idea is radical in Tbilisia, Georgia, Eastern Europe. The oppression of Baptists by the Orthodox Church is a result of this radical ecclesiology. This view of the church that says every member is a minister, every

Christian is a priest, every believer can be a Bible student and every church is free is a radical view. I am a Baptist because I believe in a non-hierarchical approach to church.

## I am a Baptist because I believe in a non-creedal approach to faith.

**T**he difference between a confession and a creed is that, in a confession, we declare what we believe. We declare it freely and without coercion. In a creed, we declare what we must believe, or, more specifically, what others must believe. Baptists have always been confessional, but they have resisted creeds. They have always believed no creed but Christ, no statement about the Bible, but only the Bible itself as their authority.

This non-creedal approach to faith has caused some to accuse Baptists of not believing anything, or failing to set theological or doctrinal parameters. Others have rightly

noted the stream of anti-intellectualism that runs deep within the Baptist family.

There is the story of the Baptist preacher who was against education because he believed it interfered with the Second Coming. He used as his proof-text that verse where Jesus said, “In the hour that you think not, the Son of Man cometh.” But for every one of these kind of folks, there are many others who have believed deeply in loving God with the mind as well as the heart.

Baptists have been passionate about doctrine and theological education, both at the lay and clergy level. But we have been non-creedal in our commitment to doctrinal integrity and theological inquiry. We have championed the freedom of every individual to interpret Scripture, to discern God’s will and to act out of conscience.

## I am a Baptist because I believe in freedom.

I love the kind of house that freedom builds. It’s a big house that has space for differing and sometimes even competing ideas. We are better for those broader perspectives. Baptists create a house where differing perspectives are not only tolerated but encouraged. So, in the Baptist house, you have a Jerry Falwell and a James Dunn; a Jesse Helms and a Jesse Jackson; a Billy Graham and a Martin Luther King, Jr.; a Bill Clinton and a Trent Lott. It is true that freedom not only creates a large family, but at times a fussing family. In the Baptist family, we will disagree.

Everybody has heard the story that where there are two Baptists there are three opinions. We’re not like the creedal folk. At Wheaton College, every student signs a creed, every faculty member signs a creed, and every administrator signs a creed. Now, Wheaton is a fine institution and I commend it; but it’s not Baptist. In a Baptist university or a Baptist church or a Baptist institution there will be diversity,

differences, and even difficulty. But that tension is intrinsic to what it means to be Baptist. Freedom creates diversity. Baptists are neither faint of heart nor weak of constitution, leading to stories like that of the woman who said, “I’d like to be a Baptist, but I’m not constitutionally able.”

One is a Christian by grace and a Baptist by conviction. But, in all this freedom, is there any center, is there a unifying vision or foundational principle that binds us Baptists together? That question leads to one last reason that I’m a Baptist.

**I am a Baptist because  
I believe that a personal  
experience of God’s grace  
revealed in Jesus Christ is  
what binds us together.**

**M**ore than 100 years ago, Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist pastor in Rochester, New York, and sometimes

called the founder of the “social gospel,” wrote a series of articles published in the Rochester Baptist Journal entitled “Why I Am a Baptist.” In the first of those articles he writes,

The Christian faith as Baptists hold it, sets spiritual experience boldly to the front as the one great thing in religion. It aims at experiential religion. We are an evangelistic body. We summon all men to conscious repentance from sin, to conscious prayer for forgiveness. We ask a man: ‘Have you put your faith in Christ? Have you submitted your will to His will? Have you received the inward assurance that your sins are forgiven and that you are at peace with God?’ If anyone desires to enter our churches we ask for evidence of such experience and we ask for nothing else. We do not ask him to recite a creed or catechism. The more simple and heartfelt the testimony is, the better we like it. If it is glib and wordy, we distrust it. Experience is our sole requisite for receiving baptism; it is fundamental in our church life.

We apply the same test to our ministry. The first thing we ask a candidate is about his conversion and Christian experience. The next thing we ask him is if he is conscious of being personally called to the work of the ministry; that also probes for experience with God. Finally we ask him for his view of doctrine, but there, too, we discourage any mere recitation of what is orthodox, and are best pleased if all his intellectual beliefs are plainly born of inward conviction and experience.

In this direct insistence on conscious personal experience a true Baptist Church is about as clear-cut and untrammelled as any religious body can well be.

When we Baptists insist on personal experience as the only essential thing in religion, we are hewing our way back to original Christianity. (*emphasis mine*).

The language of Baptists in trying to get at personal experience is sometimes confusing to folks. We talk about “being washed in the blood.” We ask people “Have you been

to the cross?” or “Are you saved?” “Have you been born again?” “Have you accepted Jesus as your Savior?” But, though we fumble with words and say it poorly sometimes, we know deep down that the one great thing in religion is personal experience with God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ. This is the center. This is the common tie that binds us together.

I know Baptists who are Calvinists and Baptists who are Armenians. I know Baptists who are charismatic and Baptists who are not charismatic. I know Baptists who are liberal and others who are fundamentalists. Some are “high church” and some are “low church.” Some are Republicans and some are Democrats. But the central reality of life in the Baptist witness is personal experience of God’s grace revealed in Christ.

So I’m glad to be a Baptist kind of Christian. Aren’t you?

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