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Although the Baptist denomination has existed for more than three and a quarter centuries, it has not formulated any authoritative creed. This fact must not be interpreted to mean that Baptists view Christian doctrine with indifference. Far from it. The various statements of faith they have drawn up across the years bear witness to their concern for right theological opinion. Nor must it be thought that they despise or lightly esteem the great historic creeds of the Church. In fact, they respect these as worthy attempts to give an intelligent interpretation to Christian truth and experience. However, they would not be bound by them nor would they permit these creeds to prevent a fresh interpretation of Christian truth and experience in the thought-forms of today. Baptists will accept no authoritative creed, will bind their conscience by no written statement of belief, and will subscribe to no creed. For Baptists the New Testament is their only creed and each is given freedom to interpret it for himself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament then becomes their sufficient rule of faith and practice. On its teachings they base their doctrines and ordinances. Loyalty to the Scriptures is a Baptist characteristic. They are lovers of the Word and seek to be followers of its teachings.

Baptists are not in agreement as to what is their fundamental principle. Some hold that it is the competency of the soul in religion, or the priesthood of believers, as it is more commonly designated. It means that the soul possesses the capacity to have direct dealings with God without the mediation of church, sacrament, or priest. Dr. E. Y. Mullins contends that this

is the fundamental principle of Baptists. Others hold that the Lordship of Christ is our fundamental principle and that all the others stem from this root. The latter view is accepted in this paper.

The Lordship of Christ is our great fundamental. He is the Lord and Master and we are the disciples and servants. Jesus said, “Ye call me Lord and Master, and ye do well, for so I am.” (John 13:13), Again He said: “One is your Master, even Christ, and ye are brethren.” (Mt. 23:8.) He claimed that “all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” (Mt. 28:18). As Lord and Master his disciples owe him implicit obedience. He is the Head of the Church and His true followers are the Body through which His Spirit functions. He is the Lord of the conscience and by no other should the conscience be coerced. Christ’s authority is supreme and to it we must yield unquestioning obedience. Christ is the Sovereign Lord of the universe, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. As Dr. R. J. McCracken has well said: “In all ages Christian discipleship has meant only one thing—the unreserved acceptance of the Lordship of Christ,”

The priesthood of believers or the competency of the soul in religion is another basic Baptist principle. This means that every man may have direct access to God through the mediating Christ without any assistance from church, sacrament, or priest. Every child may go directly to his Father. To him the way of prayer is open, the door of forgiveness ajar, and the gate of salvation wideswung. Whosoever will is competent to enter here. No church or sacrament is an exclusive channel of salvation or a medium of the forgiving grace of God. The human soul created in the image of God is competent in and of itself, without any mediators save Christ himself, to have free and unhampered access to God. We have been made kings and priests unto God. The veil of the temple has been rent in twain. The mercy seat has been disclosed to all. This doctrine is the heritage of the Protestant Reformation and stands like an impregnable rock against every tide of sacerdotalism and priestcraft.

A third principle is **regenerate church membership**. Baptists stress the spiritual nature of the Church. It is not a mere human institution; it is divine in its origin; Christ is its Founder. It is not an institution originated by man, but a spiritual fellowship created by Christ. The figures of speech by which it is described in the New Testament testify to its spiritual nature; the Body of which Christ is the Head, the Temple of the living God, the Household of faith, and the Household of God.

Since the Church is spiritual in its origin and nature, it follows that only the spiritually renewed are qualified for membership in this spiritual society. It would be most incongruous to include in the Church as Christ’s Body those who are not connected by a living faith with its Head. No rightful place have they there. On this truth Baptists base their most nearly distinctive doctrine of regenerate church membership. No candidate for baptism is ever asked to subscribe to a creed or recite a catechism, but he is definitely questioned as to his spiritual experience. This is done because Baptists maintain that the prerequisite to church membership is a spiritual change or renewal wrought by the Spirit through personal faith of the candidate.

The experience of saving grace in Christ qualifies for church membership

Baptists do not believe in a church of “mixed” membership, but in a “separated,” called-out membership. This is a high ideal, and it is not always realized. Some of the unregenerate unfortunately get into our churches even as some of the unworthy entered the fellowship of the early Church. This unhappy condition we deplore. However, this happens not because of, but in spite of our principle of regenerate church membership. And furthermore, there is a vast difference between receiving the unregenerate into membership as a definite policy and having some of them creep in unawares. What is needed is not a relaxing of this * principle, but the exercising of greater care in receiving candidates for membership after baptism.

Soul liberty is another principle that is dear to the heart of Baptists. To them religious liberty is an inherent and inalienable human right. Since man is a free moral agent made in the divine image, he is morally responsible to God for his actions. It follows, therefore, that in matters concerning his relation to God his conscience must not be coerced. No Church or State has any right to interfere with any man in the exercise of his belief or worship. Each must be left free to believe or not to believe in God, to obey or disobey Him, to worship or not to worship Him according to the dictates of his own conscience. Men must also be at liberty to hold, teach, and propagate the truth that they believe has been committed to them by God.

Most vigorously and persistently have Baptists contended for this principle of soul liberty. Their adherence to it is one of the resplendant glories of the denomination. Had the Baptists done nothing more for humanity than to uphold this principle, they would still be entitled to the lasting gratitude of mankind. From their earliest beginnings they nailed the flag of religious liberty at the masthead and there it has waved in splendour through the years.

While maintaining for themselves the right to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience, Baptists have championed that right for all others. Though persecuted, whipped, and imprisoned for their stubborn adherence to this principle, Baptists have never been persecutors of those who differed with them in theological opinion. Never could be hurled at them the biting jibe that Josh Billings thrust at the Puritans: “The Puritans,” he said, “came over to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences and to keep other people from worshipping Him according to th’r’n.” The soul liberty a Baptist claims for himself he gladly accords to all others. Tolerance toward those who differ with him in matters religious is a vital part of a Baptist’s belief and practice.

Modern Baptists should never be allowed to forget the contribution their forefathers in the faith have made to the cause of civil and religious liberty. To them belongs the honor of being the first people in the history of the world to establish a civil government and place absolute religious freedom as its cornerstone. Little Rhode Island was that state and Roger Williams, the Welsh Baptist, (afterwards a “Seeker”) who was banished from Massachusettes, was its founder. An English writer on Puritanism has paid this splendid tribute to Roger

Williams: "It is his unique title to pre-eminence and fame that he was the first to found an absolutely free church in an absolutely free state."

Prof. Masson in referring to the first Baptist church founded on British soil in 1612, the old mother-church of the Baptists of the world, wrote: "It was, in short, from their little dingy meeting-house . . . that there flashed out, first in England, the absolute doctrine of Religious Liberty." Through persecution, fine, and imprisonment the Baptists of Virginia fought the battle of religious liberty and of the separation of Church and State, and won. When the Constitution of the United States was being drawn up, the Baptists were largely instrumental in having the principle of religious liberty written into its provisions. Sir W. Robertson Nicoll, eminent religious journalist of Britain, has declared that "The provision in the United States Constitution against religious tests of any kind is due in large measure to Baptists." It is not surprising, therefore, that the American historian, George Bancroft, should pay this deserving tribute to the Baptists: "Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was from the first a trophy of the Baptists."

Baptists stand for the **separation of the Church and State**. Back in the days of Constantine, the tragic union of Church and State began. It militated against the true spirituality of the Church. It dyed the fields of Europe with **blood**. The Baptist denomination, from its very beginning, has stood against the union of Church and State and has challenged the right of the State to interfere in matters religious. Since Church and State discharge different functions in different spheres, the one has no right to intermeddle with the other. The Church should not seek to dominate in affairs of state and neither should the State attempt to rule in the religious sphere. However, Baptists must ever seek to be patriotic and loyal citizens, discharging to the full the obligations of true citizenship, but never hesitating to criticize or oppose the State when its purposes run counter to the plain teachings of Jesus. In matters pertaining to man's personal relation to his God, Baptists have ever challenged the right of the State to interfere.

Time was when this principle was so generally accepted that it could almost be forgotten. It was taken for granted among civilized people. But in modern times it has been challenged anew and on a wide front. Totalitarian states have demanded from their citizens an allegiance hitherto reserved for God alone, and they have sought to make the Churches subservient to themselves. Russia was determined to banish religion and make atheism the official creed. Germany and Japan strove to make the Churches the tools of the State, Thus the doctrine of religious liberty has been violated and the principle of the separation of Church and State flagrantly denied. In Europe particularly the battle for religious liberty and the separation of Church and State must be fought all over again.

Baptists believe in the **independence of the local church**. In polity they are congregational. Each congregation carries on its local affairs and will brook no interference, much less dictation, from any Association' or Convention. It engages its own pastors, arranges'

its own services, and claims the right to ordain its own ministers. In the conduct of its own internal affairs^{it} is absolutely independent.

While jealously guarding the independence of the local church, Baptists early recognized the **value of cooperative endeavour**. Almost from the beginning of their history they gathered in Associations, both in England and America, to promote Christian fellowship, disseminate information, generate enthusiasm, and join in co-operative enterprises for promoting the interests of the Kingdom of God. As early as 1624 five General Baptist churches in England organized the first Association. The Philadelphia Association, organized the first Association. The Philadelphia Association, organized in 1707, was the first in North America; and in 1800 the first Canadian Association was formed among Maritime Baptists. Thus the Baptists supplemented the principle of the independence of the local church with the complementary principle of the interdependence of the sisterhood of churches. This principle has had a progressive growth across the years until there is now a series of organizations ranging from the local church to the world brotherhood of the 14,000,000 Baptists. These include the local church, the District meeting, the Association, the Convention, the Federation, and the Baptist World Alliance. Excessive independence with its inherent weaknesses and inefficiency is redeemed by a full recognition of the interdependence of the churches. No church is compelled to adopt the program of Convention, but practically every church in recognition of its interdependence within the denomination gladly assumes its share in that program.

Baptists hold that the sacraments, which they prefer to call **Ordinances, are symbols of spiritual realities**. In the New Testament Baptists can find nothing but believers' baptism and immersion. They are in complete accord with the late Alfred Plummer when he says that "there is not a single verse in the New Testament from which infant baptism can be securely inferred." And the Biblical scholarship of the world supports the contention that *immersion* was the primitive form of baptism. "Believe and be baptized" is the reiterated command. Baptists do not immerse persons to save them, but rather because they profess to have been saved through faith in Christ. To them there is no saving virtue, no regenerating efficacy in water, however applied, with the accompaniment of whatever formula or pious words. Baptists are thorough-going anti-sacramentarians.

The symbolism of immersion is significant. It preaches the gospel in an acted parable, in pictorial form. It marks a great profession on the part of the candidate. In the first place, it symbolizes the death of Christ for our salvation and his resurrection for our justification. In the second place, it symbolizes the candidate's profession to have died to sin, to all that was unworthy in the past life, and to be risen together with Christ to walk in newness of life in fellowship with Him. The baptistry then becomes a grave wherein the old life is buried in symbol. In immersion the great doctrine of regeneration is proclaimed in striking picture form, and the truth that the new birth, the changed life, is the necessary prerequisite to baptism is set forth in arresting symbol. Baptists do not place a mere ordinance at the door of the Church, as

they are sometimes charged with doing, but they do place and require there a great spiritual experience symbolized in an ordinance. Since immersion thus proclaims pictorially the all important doctrines of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection and the candidate's regeneration through the grace of Christ, it becomes for Baptists, according to Dr. H. Wheeler Robinson, "an acted creed."

The Lord's Supper is the symbol of the sacrifice of Christ on behalf of sinners; the broken bread symbolizing the broken body of Christ and the **wine typifying** the life poured forth for the salvation of **men**. It is a memorial supper observed at Jesus' command, "This do in remembrance of me." No sacramental grace is dispensed in the Supper nor any regenerative virtue imparted.

Though the ordinances are but symbols of spiritual truths and are devoid of sacramental efficacy, according to the Baptists view, they may be, and frequently are, real means of grace to those who observe them in faith. It is difficult to conceive how any candidate could obediently follow his Lord in the ordinance of believers' baptism, make the great profession of being dead to sin, and symbolize the richest spiritual experience of his life through Christ's redeeming love—and it all fail to be a profound means of grace to his soul. Nor is it easy to understand how one could participate in the memorial Supper showing the Lord's death till he come and by faith realizing anew the sacrificial love of Christ for sinful men, without it all proving a significant means of grace to his soul. Baptists need to be careful not to allow their anti-sacramentarianism to reduce the Supper to a mere perfunctory memorial feast. It is much more than that. It may be, and ought to be, when participated in by faith, a vitalizing means of grace—a real communing with Christ through the symbols, a feasting on the Bread of Life, a very partaking of the Divine nature, laying hold of the available grace and power in Jesus Christ.

Since the view is taken in this paper that the fundamental Baptist principle is the Lordship of Christ, a few words explaining how the other principles stem from this primary root would seem to be in order.

Because Jesus is Lord, His will as revealed in the New Testament must be obeyed and thus the New Testament becomes the sufficient rule of faith and practice. Since Jesus is Lord over men's lives, they must be competent to have direct dealings with Him and not to be compelled to make a proxy approach. Because Christ is the Head of the spiritual fellowship **known** as the Church, its members must be regenerate. Since every man is responsible to Christ for his actions, he must be free in conscience toward his Lord and never coerced; nor must the State be permitted to put that conscience in bonds. Because each Christian is a member of Christ's Body, he functions democratically through his local church group. Thus we see that our principles (1) of the New Testament as our creed, (2) the competency of the soul in religion, (3) regenerate church membership, (4) believers' baptism, (5) soul liberty and (6) the separation of Church and State all stem directly from our great fundamental—the *Lordship of Christ*.