

What are Baptists?

On the way to expressing Baptist identity in a changing Europe

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Introduction

The following document is an explanation as to who Baptists are, and is not intended to be a confession of faith. Inevitably and properly, however, it includes certain affirmations about Christian faith and gospel. The statement is not meant to compel assent or to replace the confessions of faith of the different Baptist Unions in Europe. It should be stressed therefore that the document is descriptive, recording both agreements and differences between Baptists. There is no attempt being made to alter the convictions of certain Baptist Unions, or to produce any uniformity among them. However, it also seemed important at this time to try to express, wherever possible, the common mind that Baptist Christians have about central matters of faith and conduct, and so to find what unites us.

In essentially its present form this document was received by the Council of the European Baptist Federation at its meeting in High Leigh, England, in September 1992. The Council was not asked to approve it as an agreed statement, but simply to commend it for use among Unions, churches and seminaries. The Council did so commend it, and encouraged the Division of Theology and Education to publish it under its own name, and to translate it in several languages for wide circulation. The Council also agreed that the document was not a fixed thing but a paper 'in process', and so encouraged the Division to continue receiving suggestions regarding the substance of the paper, and making revisions to it.

While this paper is not an agreed statement of the EBF, it has

benefited in its composition from the advice and wisdom of a very wide range of the European Baptist family (as recounted in the *Appendix*), and can truly claim to be 'on the way' to confessing Baptist identity in a changing Europe.

1. We are part of the whole, world-wide Christian Church and we confess faith in One God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Baptists understand themselves to be part of a continuing stream of Christian truth and devotion that has flowed from Biblical times. However, they trace the more immediate origin of their congregations to the period of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, and are indebted to the recovery at that time of the biblical principle of 'justification by God's grace through faith alone'.

While Baptists have traditionally refused to bind themselves to creeds, following the Reformation watchword of 'Scripture alone', they have always recognised such early statements as the Nicene Creed, the Definition of Chalcedon and 'The Apostles' Creed' as being true witnesses to the Christian faith. Holding faith in the triune God, Baptists share basic beliefs with other Christian churches, including: God's work as Creator; the fallen nature of human beings; the perfect humanity and deity of Jesus Christ, who is God manifest in a human person; redemption through the life, atoning death and resurrection of Christ; the transforming of personal and social life by the power of the Holy Spirit; and the final fulfilment of God's purposes.

The first Baptist church, in the modern sense, gathered in London in 1611. Its immediate roots lay in small groups of believers within England which had separated from the State

Church during the period of the English Reformation in the 16th. century, but it was also shaped by Reformation movements on the continent of Europe. Several of its founding members had lived for a while in Holland where they had sought religious liberty, and where they had been influenced by successors of the earlier continental "Anabaptist" movement which had flourished in Switzerland, with its emphasis upon Christian discipleship and baptism of believers.

Baptist churches on the continent of Europe outside Great Britain were mainly established in the 19th. century, drawing upon new movements of Christian pietism within Germany and Scandinavia at that time, and with some help from Baptist churches in Britain and North America. Baptists in Central and Eastern Europe feel a specially close connection with the Anabaptists who had an impact upon the society of their countries in earlier times, although their link with them is more of a spiritual kinship than a clear historical continuity. Today there are Baptist Unions in nearly every European country, linked in fellowship through the European Baptist Federation. The Baptist World Alliance, formed in 1905, joins together some 38 million Baptist church members and a total of some 80 million members of congregations in over 150 countries throughout the world.

2. We affirm the need for personal faith in Jesus Christ and for discipleship in his likeness.

Baptists believe that every Christian person should be able to attest his or her own trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord; the personal story of faith will include repentance towards God the Father and renewal of life by the Holy Spirit of God. Such an experience of the grace of God should lead to a radical discipleship which reflects the manner of life of Jesus Christ,

and which should shape ethics and action not only in the church but in wider society.

3. Our final authority in faith and practice is Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Scriptures and present among his people through the Holy Spirit.

Baptists recognise the rule of Jesus Christ, the Son of God risen from the dead, and present today to guide believers into all truth whenever they gather together in his name. His rule takes precedence over all other authorities. In order to discern and interpret the authority of Christ among them, Baptists appeal in the first place to the Scriptures, believing these to be the means by which all sources of truth about God are to be assessed and judged.

4. We recognise the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary authority for knowing God's revelation in Christ.

Baptists believe that God speaks his word to human beings through the Scriptures, which are inspired by his Spirit. They usually think it right to call the Scriptures 'the word of God', because the written word witnesses to God's supreme Word which is Jesus Christ. All teaching of Christian doctrine, including creeds and tradition, must therefore be tested by its harmony with Scripture. Baptists expect the church to be continually reformed by hearing the word of God through Scripture, and they also expect new light to spring forth from Scripture by the power of the Holy Spirit in every generation. While individual believers must always allow their interpretation of Scripture to be illuminated by the understanding of the wider Christian community, they have the final right to discern for

themselves what God is saying to them through the word and by the Spirit.

5. We understand the Church to be a fellowship of believers, sharing the table of the Lord.

Baptists understand the church to be made up of believers who have covenanted with each other and with God to worship and work together. They have often spoken of themselves as being a 'gathered community', meaning both that God has called them together as the Body of Christ visible in one place, and that they have voluntarily agreed so to meet. Their mutual life finds a central expression in gathering around the table where the Lord's Supper is celebrated in bread and wine, and they believe that here they are also in fellowship with the whole Body of Jesus Christ which is the world-wide Church.

Baptists welcome others who have not yet become church members into the wider fellowship of the church community; among these, children are especially accepted. The birth of children is often marked with a ceremony of thanksgiving and blessing. Baptists do not think that the salvation of children depends upon their being baptised. Rather, children are to be taught and guided in the way of Christ with the hope that in due time they may come to a personal faith in Christ as Lord for themselves, and become members of the church through baptism as believers.

6. We practise baptism, for believers only, into the Body of Christ.

Baptists find that baptism in the New Testament and the earliest church was normally immersion into water, in the triune name of God, of those who could confess their personal allegiance to

Jesus Christ as Lord. A person must therefore have faith before being baptised; in baptism there is coming together of this human faith with the grace of God as the believer shares in the death and resurrection of Christ which is symbolized by immersion, so also bearing witness to salvation. All this makes the act inappropriate for infants.

Baptism is inseparable from entrance into membership of the church as the Body of Christ, though Baptists allow freedom of conscience among themselves about the way this is to be worked out. Many churches insist that those joining the church must first be baptised as believers; others, recognising with sadness the broken nature of the Church Universal, will accept those who have been baptised as infants and confirmed in other Christian churches; still others, in special circumstances, will permit membership simply on confession of personal faith in Christ. Notwithstanding such differences, all Baptists believe that a return to the New Testament practice of believers' baptism is essential for true understanding of the nature of faith, the church and discipleship.

7. We affirm the freedom and the responsibility of each local congregation to discover the purpose of Christ for its own life and work.

Members of local Baptist churches gather in a 'Church Meeting' to arrange their own affairs, both practical and spiritual, under the rule of Christ. Decisions concerning every area of church life, including the ordering of worship and the calling of a minister to serve among them, are taken by consent of the meeting. Important decisions are usually reached through a democratic process of voting, but the aim of the meeting is not for groups to win votes for their cause, but for everyone to find the purpose of Christ for his church. Although the local church

is legally independent, it will recognise its spiritual interdependence with others in its aim to find the mind of Christ, and will for example be open to the views of other churches with which it is in fellowship.

8. We affirm the 'priesthood of all believers', in which all members of the church are called to ministry; some among them are called to exercise spiritual leadership, which is always to be understood as serving.

Baptists hold that all believers are called to serve Christ in his church and in the world, and that for this task the Holy Spirit distributes gifts to the whole people of God. They expect to find a whole range of spiritual gifts in a local church, with members exercising variously such gifts as teaching, evangelism, pastoring, guiding, serving, prophetic insight, knowledge, praying, healing, administration and hospitality. These ministries are both for the building up of the church and for the bringing of healing and reconciliation into every area of daily life and work.

Baptists also believe, however, that Christ calls some to exercise a ministry of spiritual leadership, with particular responsibilities for preaching, teaching and pastoral care. Among Baptists there has generally been a two-fold office of 'minister' and 'deacons'. A local church appoints a group of deacons from among its own members to serve with the minister, although some churches also now appoint a number of 'elders' who generally have greater pastoral responsibility. Church members gathered in the church meeting are responsible for testing and recognising whether people have in fact received these various calls from God to serve among them.

Within this accepted pattern, Baptist churches show some differences in their understanding of spiritual leadership. Most

ordain their ministers by laying on of hands, after they have completed their theological education. Some recognise the call of both men and women to be ministers, while others recognise only men. Each Baptist church has the freedom to invite someone to serve it as minister, but some Baptist Unions will only designate as 'ministers' those who have had their vocation tested and approved by a wider group of churches than a single local church, thus recognising them as ministers of the Church Universal. All Baptists, however, recognise that the local church acting on its own authority can appoint some of its members as 'deacons' or 'elders'. Within some Unions of churches, senior ministers are appointed to have pastoral care over a whole association of churches, though their authority lies in the giving of counsel to a local church and its minister rather than exercising executive power over them.

Despite differences, Baptists believe that it is the coming together of believers into fellowship that calls for spiritual oversight, rather than thinking that the existence of a spiritual leader creates a church.

9. We believe that the mutual commitment expressed in baptism and in membership of the local church should lead to wider partnerships between churches wherever possible.

From the beginning of their history, local Baptist churches have sought fellowship with other churches, for mutual encouragement, guidance, sharing of mission and as a sign of reconciliation for the world. Baptist churches form local associations with other Baptist churches, coming together into a Union of churches at national level. Many (though not all) Unions and their member churches also share in ecumenical partnerships in both national and international councils.

10. We believe that every Christian disciple is called to witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and that the Church as a part of God's Kingdom is to share in the whole mission of God in the world.

Baptists believe that each Christian disciple is called to speak of his or her own personal faith to others, and to take an active part in the spreading of the gospel of Christ throughout the world. Since mission includes both evangelism and social concern, Baptists also believe that they are to give expression to God's love for humankind through meeting people's physical as well as spiritual needs. The coming of God's sovereign rule is, however, wider than the Church and Baptists recognise God's call to share with him in his work of creating justice, social welfare, healing, education and peace in the world.

11. We affirm the need to preserve freedom of conscience, and so we accept differences among us.

Baptists have throughout their history urged governments to pass laws enshrining freedom of conscience, including freedom in matters of religious belief and worship. At the same time Baptists encourage a spiritual freedom among their churches; within a common commitment to Jesus Christ and a broad Baptist identity, they welcome and accept differences of outlook and diversity of practice.

12. We stand for the separation of church and state, rooted in the sole lordship of Christ and concern for religious liberty.

Baptists have always pressed for the separation of the institutions of the church and the state, meaning that the state should

have no power to legislate over matters of religious belief or have any part in the government of the church. Correspondingly, the church must oppose the State's passing of laws which would give more privileges to religious believers, or to a certain denomination of them, than to other citizens. It also means that no country or section of it can be designated by the State as the preserve of a particular part of the Christian Church or of any non-Christian religion.

On the other hand, Baptists show a sense of responsibility for the state, and most churches encourage their members to become actively involved in politics and to take posts within the civil authorities. They also believe that the Church as a whole must speak with a prophetic voice in criticism of the state where it falls short of God's intention for it, and in favour of its activities when these accord with God's purposes.

13. As Christian believers, we live in hope of the final appearing of Christ in glory, and the transforming of all creation.

Having hope in God's future, when the lordship of Christ will at last be fully made visible, when all things will be finally reconciled in Christ and when all creation will be renewed, has led Baptists to certain actions in the present. This hope has constantly motivated them to engage in evangelism, to oppose oppressive forces in society, and to be at the forefront of the promotion of social reforms which reflect the values of the coming Kingdom of God. In this generation, in face of pollution and destruction of the natural environment, Baptists also recognise a new responsibility to care for the whole of creation.

Appendix : the composition of this document

This paper has not been designed for those who profess no Christian faith at all. In that case it would have been a very different kind of document, in style and content. It is offered to the members and especially the leaders of other denominations of the Christian Church, to remove misunderstandings and to witness to our particular place as Baptist Christians within the whole family of God. It is being offered as just one tool for communication in this way. Various Baptist Unions have produced their own pieces of literature about Baptist identity in recent times, but it seemed good to try and produce one piece by the EBF acting together.

In this context, the origin of this paper is significant. The idea of creating it arose during the Consultation on Baptist Mission in Dorfweil, Germany (26-29 January 1992), and the 13 clauses were first put together as the summary of the work of discussion groups there. In plenary session at Dorfweil the 13 clauses were approved in principle, though the wording was recognised to be provisional. That is, the document began in the context of thinking about Christian mission in a changing Europe; it was not intended to use it directly in mission, but as a means of answering the question raised by other Christian groups, 'Who are these Baptists who are engaging in mission?' It was also intended to explain the nature of the Christian congregations we were hoping to establish or enlarge through mission, and to be a resource in discovering how we could share in a common mission with other Christians.

The process of making the document has been a consultative one at every stage, as its history shows. After the 13 clauses were agreed in outline at Dorfweil, the Division of Theology and Education was asked to prepare a draft document, including the adding of paragraphs of extra explanation to each clause. Those present at the Consultation asked that these paragraphs should reflect the range of opinion which had been expressed in their various discussion groups. The document was then sent to Baptist Unions throughout Europe for comment. Their responses were carefully considered, and were reported to the meeting of the European Baptist Teachers of Theology in July 1992 when the document was discussed and refined, although the teachers made no attempt to produce an agreed statement. To aid further revision,

three consultants were appointed from the Teachers' Conference, representing Eastern and Western Europe. In the light of all this consultation, a revised draft was reviewed at meeting of the Division at the EBF Council in 1992 (England), and further revisions were incorporated in the divisional meeting at the EBF Council of 1993 (Moldova).

