

RIGHT or WRONG? 'Baptist' in name

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Our church is talking seriously about sponsoring a new congregation in our area. But we seem headed for a meltdown. Several folks insist "Baptist" must be kept out of the name of the new church. Surely there are moral grounds for requiring a Baptist church to include "Baptist" in its name.

This is not a theoretical question. When the church I now serve, Second Baptist Church of Lubbock, moved to a new location in 2001, the church had a long conversation about whether to change its name and eliminate the word "Baptist." (Some folks also didn't like being "Second.") I know of no moral ground for requiring a Baptist church to include "Baptist" in its name. Some might argue a church is not providing "truth in advertising" if it does not include its denominational identity in its name. Perhaps there was a time when this was true, but in today's world, that is no longer the case. A community church with an innocuous name can belong to a particular denomination or be nondenominational.

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However, there are some ethical issues connected with a church's name and its denominational identity. First, it is unethical to have "Baptist" in your name and not really be a Baptist church. Of course, there are many issues about which Baptists disagree. However, there are some issues that are non-negotiable. You cannot claim to be a Baptist and not believe in and practice these fundamental Baptist tenets. For example, if a church does not allow all members to participate in decision-making, then it cannot be a Baptist church—regardless of its name.

Second, a church may not have its denominational identity in its name, but it should make clear what its denominational identity is. Some churches are members of the Southern Baptist Convention or the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship or the American Baptist Churches USA, but seem to want to hide the fact. Of course, one can understand a church wanting to distance itself from a denomination that has acted in ways that are embarrassing or incongruent with the church's belief or practice. Nevertheless, it seems less than honest to support a particular denomination while trying to hide that fact from the general public and unsuspecting church members.

Third, it is embarrassing and sad that many Baptists now feel the name "Baptist" has been soiled. There are many kinds of Baptists, and no church can agree with every stripe of Baptist. Nevertheless, "Baptist" is an honorable name, and I am happy and proud the church I serve kept "Baptist" in its name. I believe true Baptists should live in ways that will help redeem the name.

Fourth, I do think there is a moral requirement that churches endeavor to live up to the name "Church." That, I believe, is the greater necessity in our world.

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Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.

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