

EDITORIAL: So what if the sign says “Baptist”?

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Imagine you’ve just moved into a community. You’re driving down the street, and you see “Baptist” on a church sign. Does that make you want to stop in for a visit next Sunday? Do you have any idea if you would feel welcomed? Does “Baptist” in the church’s name tell you if you would agree with the brothers and sisters who call this their spiritual home?

Baptists around the world are celebrating our 400th anniversary this year. In 1609, a small group of English Separatist exiles led by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys sought refuge in Holland. After considerable prayer, Bible study and deliberation, they decided to follow a new path. So, Smyth baptized himself, then Helwys and the other adults, and they founded the first Baptist church in the world.

Editor Marv Knox

While believer’s baptism may have been Baptists’ earliest distinguishing feature—thus their name—it wasn’t their sole characteristic. Within a generation, they were known for their disputes. Two groups soon developed. Particular Baptists emphasized God’s sovereignty and a “particular” salvation set aside only for people of God’s choosing. General Baptists promoted free will and a “general” salvation for whoever accepts God’s gift of grace. And that was only in the 17th century. Through the generations, Baptists have argued and split over so many issues that Walter Shurden has written a fascinating history of Baptists (*Not a Silent People*) by telling the tale of their disputes.

Now, all things Baptist have become even more bewildering. Some churches that are Baptist in every respect—up to and including affiliation

with Baptist conventions—have dropped “Baptist” from their name. Some of them are embarrassed because of decades of Baptist battles. Some think denominational labels are a liability in a post-denominational age. Some just don’t want to be pinned down.

On the other hand, many churches fly the Baptist banner simply because they practice believer’s baptism by immersion. Baptism is their distinguishing feature, so they must be Baptists. Never mind that they never affiliate with other Baptists and don’t follow broadly recognized Baptist polity or hold to beliefs embraced by most Baptists. Oh, and some who even affiliate still don’t hold to many Baptist beliefs.

Still, you’re new to the community, and you’re scoping out churches and you see “Baptist.” Makes you wonder. Since the “Baptist” label means practically nothing, you’ll just have to check the church for yourself. If you’re a true Baptist, you’ve got the freedom to define what being a Baptist means to you. But here’s my checklist. Historic Baptists believe in:

- ***Soul competency and the priesthood of all believers.*** God gave each person the inalienable ability to relate directly to God. You don’t need another person to mediate between you and God.
- ***Salvation by grace through faith in Christ.*** God’s unmerited favor makes a relationship with God—now and forever—possible. All you have to do is believe and accept.
- ***Believer’s baptism.*** The act of baptism does not confer salvation. It reflects our willful, knowing identification with Christ’s death, burial and resurrection, and hope for resurrection from our graves.
- ***Local-church autonomy.*** If Baptist believers are free and independent, so are their churches.
- ***Separation of church and state, and religious liberty.*** Historically,

Baptists have believed the freedom they desire should be extended to everyone. To be authentic, faith must be free—from both religious and political coercion.

- ***Absolute authority of Scripture.*** *The Bible is our certain and infallible guide for seeking God's will, following Christ and living in the power of the Holy Spirit.*

- ***Passion for evangelism, ministry and missions.*** *We who have been blessed should not hoard so great a gift.*

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