

# An Abstract of Principles for Baptist Churches

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Baptists enjoy a rich confessional heritage that is in danger of being forgotten, diminished, or reinterpreted along progressive lines. That tradition has been captured in several historic Baptist confessions, but most preeminently in the First and Second London Baptist Confessions and the *Philadelphia* and *New Hampshire Confessions*. Below we have sought to abstract and summarize the basic principles that distinguish the Baptist tradition and put them in today's language. Churches are free to make use of *The Abstract* in whatever way they see fit. Some may use it as a resource or teaching tool, while others may formally adopt it with confessional authority. Whatever the case, it is our earnest desire to commend these principles to a new generation of Baptists, not only for the sake of calling Baptists back to tradition but because we believe that the principles below are deeply rooted in the Scriptures and thus represent the mind of Christ for the organization of his church. When the church seeks to honour Christ first by submitting to his word, she begins to flourish, and the gospel begins to flourish along with her. Below we have given this summary in the following seven articles:

## 1. Christ's Headship Over the Church

Christ is the only head of the church and he purchased her with the price of his own blood. While Baptists have always held to the autonomy of the local church, such autonomy was always meant to speak of freedom from the coercive power of every other external body in sacred things but never meant freedom from the rule of Christ. Christ alone has legislative authority while the church alone has the power to enact his will only once she has heard his word. Christ, himself, is the chief cornerstone. The church is built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets whose authority is today enshrined in the pages of the New Testament. Christ rules over his church by his word. When at their best, Baptists have always held to a high view of Scripture and have sought to bring the whole of their lives and doctrine in line with the infallible word of God. For Baptists, this submission also includes matters of ecclesiology. The Scriptures are sufficient and under the illumination of the Spirit, able to guide the whole people of God with regard to the structure and polity of the church, her membership, ministry, mission, and corporate practice.

[*Genesis 49:10; Psalm 2:7-12; 110:1-3; Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 16:17-19; 28:18-20; John 14:25-26; 17:17; Acts 2:32-36; Romans 1:1-6; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16; 3:10-15; Ephesians 1:19-23; 2:20; 3:5; 4:7-16; Philippians 2:9-11; Colossians 1:15-18; 2:9-10; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Timothy 3:14-15; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 4:12-13; James 1:18, 21-25; 1 Peter 1:23-25; 3 John 3-4; Revelation 1:5-20*]

## 2. Regenerate Church Membership

Baptists agree that the Spirit's work of regeneration, or the new birth, gives one entrance into the universal church. However, at the local level, they grant membership to those who profess faith in Christ, give credible evidence of it, and are willing to covenant together in the body. The church is made up of living stones, those who have been born of imperishable seed. The Old Covenant community was a mixed community, including many unregenerate people alongside a remnant of faith. With the New Covenant, God promised to usher in a new era in which he would pour out his Spirit on all flesh, take out the heart of stone, give a heart of flesh, and breathe life into his people, a people gathered from every nation. The Church represents the arrival of the long-anticipated New Covenant community. The old mixture between believing and unbelieving has ended and the age which was to come broke into the present. The church is that eschatological people, the first fruits of a new creation, the people upon whom the end of the ages has come. She is a community where the Spirit of God abides in every member awakening hope, giving spiritual sight, and empowering obedience.

*[Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 31:31-34; 32:38-41; Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:24-27; 37:1-14; Joel 2:28-29; Matthew 26:26-29; 28:18-20; Luke 22:20; John 3:5-8; 14:6; Acts 2:14-21; 2:37-47; Romans 8:9-11; 1 Corinthians 10:11; 11:25; 12:3, 12-13; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18; 5:16-17; Ephesians 2:1-22; Titus 3:4-7; Hebrews 8; James 1:18; 1 Peter 2:4-10; Revelation 7:9-12]*

## 3. Credobaptism

In baptism, the powerful and yet invisible, internal, regenerating work of the Spirit goes public and is made visible. Because the church is a regenerate community and true conversion is affirmed through the waters of baptism, Credobaptism (believer baptism) stands in direct contrast with the practice of Paedobaptism (infant baptism). Infants do not have the capacity to believe, and therefore are not to be baptized until they profess faith in Christ. In baptism, the individual professes faith in Christ, but a local church also lends her affirmation by placing the name of the triune God upon the believer in recognition of his/her new status and incorporation into the people of God. Baptism is also an external sign of internal cleansing and our union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection, being engrafted into him by faith. Also, in baptism believers are edified, assured and sealed in the promise of the gospel and given grace to walk in holiness and wage war against sin.

*[Ezekiel 36:25; Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12; 8:36-38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:31-34; 19:5; 22:16; Romans 6:1-23; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Galatians 3:25-28; Ephesians 1:13; 4:4-6, 30; Colossians 2:9-15; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 10:22; 1 Peter 3:21]*

## 4. Congregationalism

Seeing as the local church is a New Covenant community, where the Spirit of God indwells each member, Baptists cherish congregationalism. Congregationalism is a form of church governance that seeks to emphasize the structural implications of the reformational principle of the priesthood of all believers. When the church is assembled together, her collective voice represents the highest seat of authority under Christ. Every individual member, regardless of gender, education, vocation, ethnicity, or culture is encouraged to participate and contribute to the corporate direction and life of the church.

Members are to read the Scriptures together and discern the will of God in the affairs of the church. The assembly is tasked with the priestly work of protecting sound doctrine, affirming those that properly confess the truth of the gospel, and disciplining those who fail to live consistently with it. In this way, the congregation wields the keys of the kingdom and guards the public witness of Christ. Though the congregation is primarily responsible for this task, she nevertheless ought to be led by godly elders who seek to equip the saints for the work of the ministry.

*[Exodus 19:6; Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 15:22; 20:28; Romans 12:1-8; 1 Corinthians 5; 12:12-25; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Galatians 1:6-9; Ephesians 2:21-22; 4:1-32; Philippians 1:1; 1:27-30; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 3:15; 5:17; Titus 1:5, 6-9; Hebrews 10:19-25; 13:7, 17; 1 Peter 2:4-10; 5:1-4; 1 John 2:27; Revelation 1:6; 5:9-10]*

## **5. Autonomy of the Local Church**

Because each local assembly has been given the responsibility of establishing its own doctrinal standards, appointing its own leaders, and affirming its own members, such responsibilities can never be usurped by any external church or organization. In the governance of sacred matters, each local assembly stands independent of all other authorities. No church or minister is permitted to exercise authority or occupy a position of prominence over any other church. The autonomy of the local church is the corporate expression of the principle of soul liberty which stresses the responsibility of the individual to make discussions in matters of religion in a way that is free from coercion. In a parallel way, each congregation is free from the coercive structures of ecclesiastical power and responsible to Christ who will judge each one.

*[Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 5:29; 14:21-23; 20:28; Romans 14:4; 1 Corinthians 5; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Titus 1:5; Hebrews 10:24-25; 13:7, 17; 1 Peter 2:13-17; 5:1-4; Revelation 1:4]*

## **6. Association**

While Baptists have long cherished the autonomy of the local church, they have, at the same time, always sought free and voluntary association with like-minded churches. Autonomy is not opposed to association but is meant to protect a sense of mutuality in the relationships between churches. The New Testament everywhere bears witness to a happy kind of cooperation of the churches in the work of the gospel and a deep affectionate bond between them. They care for one another, support one another, pray for one another, visit one another, and are engaged together in one and the same mission. While association does not nullify the autonomy of any individual church, such a happy cooperation brings with it an obligation upon all the churches involved. All the churches are to live by one and the same rule. While each congregation is free in the matters stated above, the association of churches is also free to establish its own principles of unity and doctrinal standards and to excommunicate those individual churches that may no longer fit within the fellowship.

*[Acts 2:42; 15:1-35; Romans 15:25-26; 16:16; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33; 16:1-3; 2 Corinthians 8:18, 24; Galatians 2:7-11; Ephesians 1:15; 2:20; 6:18; Colossians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:7; 2:14; 3 John 5-6]*

## 7. Purity

The Purity of the church is perhaps what lies at the very heart of the Baptist tradition. Because the church is a regenerate community, all the saints ought to be growing together in holiness. By the grace of God, the local church, through its devotion and discipline, seeks to make visible the eschatological purity of the people of God. Christ himself purchased the church by his own blood and washes her with the word. She is a bride being made ready, a city on a hill, salt and light, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, called out of darkness into light to proclaim the excellencies of Christ and his gospel to the ends of the earth. As the church awaits her blessed hope, the glorious appearing of her great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, she ought to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and be self-controlled, upright, and godly. She is to exist like a light amid a crooked and twisted generation as she holds fast to the word of life. As exiles, she is to follow Christ's pattern of humility and purity as she awaits the glories of the age to come. The Church is a colony of heaven and represents Christ and his kingdom in the world. She has been entrusted with the gospel of Christ and commissioned to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that Christ commanded.

*[Leviticus 19:2; Ezekiel 36:24-27; Matthew 5:14; 28:18-20; Mark 8:34; Acts 20:28; 2 Corinthians 11:2-3; Ephesians 2:8-10; 2:19-22; 5:25-27; Philippians 1:27; 2:1-16; 3:20-21; Colossians 2:11-14; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; Titus 2:11-14; 1 Peter 1:13-25; 2:1-12; 1 John 1:5-8; 2:6; 2:15-16; 3:6; 5:18; Rev. 19:7-8]*