

## SHOULD WE ABANDON THE NAME “BAPTIST”?

**Ernest D. Pickering, Th.D.**

# Should We Abandon the Name “Baptist”?

**By**

**Ernest D. Pickering, Th.D.**

Several years ago a leading Christian magazine carried an editorial entitled “The Sin of Evangelical Sectarianism.” The author deplored what he viewed as a growing and divisive emphasis upon the various denominational traditions—Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.—and called for a lessening of such emphasis in favor of a more ecumenical approach. In response, a noted Baptist leader wrote a fine article entitled “Is It a Sin to Be a Baptist?” In today’s loose theological climate that question seems to confront us urgently.

The “in” thing today is to exchange the name “Baptist” for some other title. Many former Baptist churches are now calling themselves “Community” churches, “Christian Fellowships,” or other such names. Those who are attempting to maintain a strong Baptist witness are made to feel out of step with the crowd. They are sent on a guilt trip, their insistence upon the importance of Baptist history and doctrine being viewed as narrow, irrelevant, and divisive. This new approach reflects the general attitude of the modern church—let us be less dogmatic and more accepting of the views of others. While it seems pious, it is destructive of truth and harmful to the testimony of local churches.

The social, religious, and theological climate of our day is not favorable to the development and maintenance of a specific, well-formulated, and dogmatic theological position. Ours is a day which emphasizes the art of compromise and the skill of avoiding confrontation and offence. New evangelicals are especially devoted to this approach and quite adept at it. Unfortunately, many fundamentalists have been bitten by this bug as well. The driving motivation is “Let us do whatever will draw a bigger crowd.”

The subject at hand raises an immediate question. Are there good Christian people who are not Baptists? The answer is “Yes!” We are not claiming that only Baptists are Christians. We are not saying that

only Baptists will go to meet the Lord at the Rapture. We readily recognize that there are fundamental, separated churches and institutions which do not bear the name “Baptist.” This writer has been blessed over the years by personal fellowship with members of God’s family who would not call themselves Baptists. But, as Baptists, we feel it is time to enunciate clearly why we are called by that name and stand up without apology and with no sense of guilt for what we believe is scriptural.

#### WHY ARE SOME ABANDONING THE NAME BAPTIST?

In every generation there are theological “fads.” A current fad is the desire to change the name of a church or organization from “Baptist” to something else viewed as more acceptable. While writing this article, I received a call from a pastor who had just completed work at a Baptist seminary. He was disturbed because many of the young students in the classes did not seem to view the name “Baptist” as having any particular significance. To them, any name would do. Unfortunately, this is a typical attitude today.

In defense of this concept, some say the name “Baptist” no longer describes those of a conservative theological persuasion. They say there are various kinds of Baptist—liberal, neo-orthodox, evangelical, fundamentalist, etc. In response, however, it must be noted that the dilemma is faced no matter what name one chooses. Congregations of various persuasions can be found bearing the name “Community Church” or “Bible Church.” A church must continually define the meaning of its name.

A major concern seems to be that the public tends to associate the name “Baptist” with narrowness, strictness, and dogmatism. For this reason, many turn away from churches bearing that name. It is interesting that apparently the name “Christian” was originally given to the people of God by their enemies (Acts 11:26). It labeled who they were and what they believed. It cannot be denied that a name (and its accompanying position) can repel some people. Having been a Baptist pastor for many years, I can honestly say this was never a major problem for us in reaching people. However, this is not to say

it could not be a problem. Should not the public view Christians and their churches as different, as holding higher standards than the world, and as demanding more from their members than merely an occasional visit to the services? The strong fundamental churches of the former Soviet Union, for example, are much stricter in their spiritual demands for church members than American churches. Yet, even in the dark days of Communism when one could risk his life by attending an unregistered Baptist church, these churches had many unsaved people seeking out their services, hearing the Gospel, and being saved. There is something about a church that stands for truth which attracts people. Truth both repels and attracts.

The great English Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon is sometimes invoked because he omitted the name “Baptist” from the title of his church, calling it the “Metropolitan Tabernacle.” One must remember that in Spurgeon’s day the Act of Uniformity and other laws were in effect. Any group not part of the Church of England could not use the name “church” in its title since the only recognized church was the state church. The absence of the title “Baptist” from the Tabernacle’s name was in no way an indication of any reluctance on Spurgeon’s part to be identified as Baptist. In the very first words which he uttered from the pulpit at the dedication of the newly-constructed Tabernacle he said, “I do not hesitate to take the name Baptist.”

Many who are forsaking the Baptist name today claim they can still hold all the Baptist distinctives without employing the name. My response to that is based on a good many years of observing the ecclesiastical scene. Baptist churches that change their name (1) already have weakened Baptist convictions and have been slipping toward a broader position for years and (2) will only see that process hastened by the change of name. The old adage by Shakespeare may not always be true: “What’s in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

Usually by the time a church comes to a vote as to whether or not to change its name, it has harbored for some time within its membership

people who were not really Baptists at heart. They have perhaps come from other backgrounds, have not been fully instructed in the Baptist position (or have not accepted the instruction), and are eager to shed what they feel is a “denominational image” in favor of something broader. To such persons a name change indicates the beginnings of a change in the position of the church, which will be gradual but final.

### **Diminished Emphasis on the Teaching of Baptist Doctrine**

When a church refuses any longer to bear the name “Baptist,” the great Bible truths known as “Baptist distinctives” will begin to weaken in the members’ minds. One example of this is the matter of “elder rule.” Primarily under the teaching and influence of John MacArthur, many Baptist churches have adopted his view of “elder rule” and changed their name to “Community Church” or some other title. In this system elders assume the authority over the church, and the Baptist principle of congregational rule is usurped. While this has not accompanied every name change, it has accompanied many. When the church is no longer officially called a Baptist church, ignorance and apathy concerning the Baptist distinctives tend to grow.

### **Influx of Non-Baptist People**

Over the years I have observed the development of churches who drop the name “Baptist.” Almost invariably their constituency begins to change. People who would not join the church previously because of what they observed to be **denominational narrowness** will now identify with the church. In doing so, however, they will bring into the church their broader views of both doctrine and fellowship, and soon the church will take on a different image. The name “Baptist” keeps some people out of churches. This is not all bad. Some people will go along with what they view as undesirable doctrines or positions in order to benefit from the overall ministry of a church, but will be all too eager to soften up its position and public image when the opportunity avails itself.

### **An Effect on Pastoral Leadership**

When a church drops the name “Baptist,” it may expect to have a change in the type of man who would be interested in the pastorate. Men who are more inclusive will be inclined to gravitate to such a church. Some will proclaim themselves to be **baptistic** in their views, but they do not wish to be identified as **Baptists**. It is interesting that persons who do not wish to be called **Baptists** are nevertheless anxious to be known as **baptistic**. The name must have some value! Men of strong Baptist convictions will normally not accept the pastorate of a church that does not openly proclaim itself to be a Baptist church. This leaves the church vulnerable to the leadership of men of lesser convictions regarding Baptist principles.

### **Broader Associations**

Churches that drop the name “Baptist” will be more inclined, as time goes on, to broaden their sphere of fellowship. The name “Baptist” tends to be more restrictive (which is an objection many have to it). Without that name a church begins to look upon itself as more “evangelical,” with a broader base of fellowship. It tends to become less separatistic and more inclusive. Rather than limiting their cooperation to strong, fundamental, separatistic churches, they will migrate toward wider and looser fellowships, most of which will tend to be new evangelical in persuasion.

### **SPECIAL PROBLEM—COLLEGES AND SEMINARIES**

Many colleges and seminaries were brought into existence by the prayers and sacrificial giving of fundamental Baptist people. There has developed in some of these schools an “itch” to distance themselves as far as possible from their Baptist roots (the “denominational walls,” as some have called them) and become more broadly “evangelical” in their posture, while retaining, insofar as possible, the support of their Baptist constituency.

One such school, long part of a Baptist movement in the United States, embarked on a course to change its name. While publicly

asserting they were not really changing anything essential, and while “pushing the right buttons” so as to assure their longtime constituents that everything was all right, the president of this institution had a definite agenda in mind, which did not coincide with the historic position of the college. It was the president’s intent to move the school away from the separatist Baptist position it had historically occupied.

In a set of notes distributed only to the Executive Committee of the institution, the president, who had only recently come from a position in an interdenominational, new evangelical school, lamented that for all these years the college had been cut off from the “conservative evangelical community” due to its Baptist image. Since he believed this “evangelical community” needed a liberal arts college to which they could send their students, he proposed to his Executive Committee (and later to the Board of Trustees) that the Baptist school make the changes necessary in order to enable them to fill that need. One of his principal declared goals was to “broaden the student and supporting constituency to include all conservative evangelicals.” He suggested the school pattern itself after Moody Bible Institute and “de-emphasize denominational walls.” In other words, for all practical purposes, the school would cease to be a Baptist institution in the sense that its founders originally intended. Those who began the school never envisioned it to be a training ground for “evangelicals.” They purposed for it to be a center for the training of people who would have Baptist convictions to serve in fundamental Baptist churches. The entire purpose of the founders has now been perverted.

Part of the plan to change the institution involved the creation of a special board of reference apart from the regular governing board. Members of this board would not have to meet the same doctrinal and ecclesiastical requirements as members of the regular board so that “prominent evangelical Christians whose church membership might otherwise exclude them from the Board of Trustees” could serve. The name of the college was to be changed and the name “Baptist” removed from the publicized title in order to give it the desired

broader image. The proposed program has now been completed. The name is changed, the college is moving in a broader sphere, and yet it still retains its approval as an official Baptist training institution by a national body of Baptist churches.

### WHY SHOULD WE RETAIN THE NAME “BAPTIST”?

Not all share the feeling that the name “Baptist” is expendable. Large numbers of pastors and congregations still feel that there are good reasons for retaining the name and not hastily discarding it in the rush to be “contemporary” and “relevant.” What are some of these reasons?

#### **The Historical Reason**

While history, especially church history, seems of little importance to many today, it ought to be viewed as important, particularly to Baptists. Part of our problem is our churches are filled with people who know virtually nothing of Baptist history. They have no sense of history and of their ties with great men and women of the past.

Individuals and congregations holding to some of the principles now called “Baptist distinctives” can be found back in the early years of church history, even though the name “Baptist” was not commonly used until later centuries. It is not necessary, however, for us to prove a line of “historical succession” in order to establish the validity of a Baptist church today. A church is validated by its adherence to scriptural truth.

We walk with the giants when we proclaim ourselves to be Baptists. Our forefathers endured great struggles, fiery trials, and severe persecutions because they were part of a hated group—the Baptists. They were not persecuted because of the name they bore *per se*, but **because of the biblical doctrines associated with that name.**

Shall we haul down our banner and quietly sneak away on the plea that some modern hearers are offended by the Baptist name? Shall we

allow a modern generation with weakened doctrinal convictions to dictate to us our stance and approach? We should not! We should instruct our people in Baptist history and thus instill in them some of the same courage and faith that characterized our forefathers. Those who wish to drop the name “Baptist” will not be devoting much time to such instruction.

### **The Ethical Reason**

If a church is a Baptist church, why should it be ashamed to say so? Why entice people into it only later to reveal to them its true nature? This smacks of deceit. We need not be ashamed of our heritage and position. There is no valid reason to hide what we really are.

### **The Theological Reason**

When we say we are “Baptists,” we are affirming our allegiance to certain doctrines we believe to be biblical and essential. The name “Baptist,” if properly used, explained, and understood, can assist in the constant effort to keep a church from drifting theologically. It is not a guarantee of continued doctrinal faithfulness since some churches with the name “Baptist” have slipped into liberalism. It is, however, a deterrent to such defection. The name binds a church to a historical and theological position.

The name “Baptist” has historically encompassed the following doctrines:

1. ***Supreme authority of the Bible in doctrine and practice***—Doctrine is obtained from the Word of God alone.
2. ***Autonomy of the local church***—There is no valid outside control over a congregation.
3. ***Priesthood of the believer***—Each born-again person has immediate access to God.
4. ***Two ordinances***—There are no “sacraments,” only the ordinances commanded by the Lord, immersion and the Lord’s Supper.

5. ***Individual soul liberty***—No one should be coerced into any type of religious worship, but is free to choose.
6. ***Regenerate church membership***—A local church is composed of believers only.
7. ***Two church offices***—The two offices specified in Scripture are those of pastor and deacon.
8. ***Separation of church and state***—The civil government should not control the church, and the church should not seek to control the government. The church is not a political but a spiritual entity.

The name “Baptist,” as can be seen, embodies a wealth of theological significance. While it is true that goodly numbers of Baptist people do not understand this significance, that is no argument for rejecting the name. It is a powerful argument in favor of careful, systematic, and biblical instruction on all aspects of Baptist theology. We need to teach our people what it means to be a Baptist. Emphasis needs to be laid on why these Bible truths historically held by Baptists are important. Rather than downplaying the differences between ourselves and the many denominational groups around us, which is the fashion today, we need to point out the differences and their biblical significance.

Baptists historically have emphasized the local church, its composition, ordinances, functions, and mission. Ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) is not a high area of interest for most Christians today. Many do not feel the Scriptures are very definitive about the nature of the local church. It doesn’t make any difference what kind of church one belongs to as long as it “preaches the Gospel.” This would be the view of many. To quibble over matters of organization, baptism, etc., seems to be unprofitable and unimportant. The current disinterest in the nature of a true church puts the Baptists at a disadvantage because it is right at that point where they are distinctive from other groups. Some of the Baptist distinctives being disputed or ignored today are the following:

1. Necessity of single immersion for the believer as an act of personal obedience and as a prerequisite for church membership.
2. Congregational government rather than elder rule.
3. Personal separation from the world as a mark of Christian discipleship.
4. Necessity of church membership as a biblical requirement.

### CONCLUSION

The current infatuation with abandoning the name “Baptist” is but part of a larger problem in the church today—the effort to minimize differences and magnify similarities. It is also propelled by the enormous pressures of the evangelical ecumenical movement, which is gathering people of various denominational persuasions in large meetings with the express purpose of **breaking down denominational prejudices** (a la “Promise Keepers”). True Baptists cannot and ought not be a part of such efforts. The convictions we hold are not merely “denominational prejudices.” They are divinely-revealed truths rooted in the Holy Scriptures. Let us not apologize for them, but preach them and teach them in the power of the Spirit so that future generations may continue to faithfully stand by them.

---

#### **Additional copies available from:**

**Baptist World Mission**  
**Post Office Box 2149**  
**Decatur, AL 35602-2149**  
**Phone: (256) 353-2221**  
**Fax: (256) 353-2266**  
**[www.baptistworldmission.org](http://www.baptistworldmission.org)**