

# AMERICAN BAPTIST HERITAGE

## PURPOSE

This workshop can be used in a region or cluster setting, involving participants from a number of different churches. It may also be used within a local congregation that wants to explore key dimensions of our American Baptist heritage. After completing the workshop, participants will be able to name key American Baptist emphases and share ways in which these emphases can shape the life and ministry of their churches

**Note to leaders:** You do *not* need to be an expert on American Baptist heritage to lead this workshop. All the needed information is contained in the handouts that participants will use. Your main job will be to guide the participants through the process, encouraging them and organizing the sharing they will do with the entire group.

Supplementary resources are suggested at the end of the workshop design for those who wish to become more familiar with American Baptist history. These may also be helpful for the small groups that are formed during the workshop and want to pursue further study.

## BASIC WORKSHOP OUTLINE

- I Introduction (5 minutes)
- II Baptist Heritage Quiz (10 minutes)
- III Small Group Research and Preparation (30 minutes)
- IV Presentations (30 minutes)
- V Implications for Our Church (10 minutes)
- VI Closing (5 minutes)

## MATERIALS

- Name tags and markers (optional)
- Copies of handouts (some for use during the workshop and some for reading later)
- Paper and pencils

**Note:** Handouts B-G are designed to have illustrations on the flip side or as a second page. These illustrations [taken from *Keepers of the Faith: Illustrated Biographies from Baptist History*, Jeffrey D. Jones (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1999)] are available in a separate file, “NM 107 Illustrations.” They go with the handouts as follows:

Handout B	Soul Freedom	Lulu Fleming
Handout C	Priesthood of All Believers	Helen Barrett Montgomery
Handout D	Congregational Autonomy	Isabel Crawford

Handout E	Religious Liberty	John Clarke
Handout F	Believer's Baptism	John Smyth
Handout G	The Bible	Adoniram Judson

## CONDUCTING THE WORKSHOP

### I Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome participants to the workshop. If you are conducting this workshop for a cluster of churches, provide name tags. Ask participants to introduce themselves and briefly share what they like most about being a Baptist. Make note, for use later, any Baptist emphases (Handout A) that are mentioned.

### II Baptist Heritage Quiz (10 minutes)

Distribute Handout A. Call attention to the list of Baptist emphases in the left column. Discuss how the emphases came up during their sharing. Ask for initial impressions of the emphases: Are they sometimes misunderstood? Which do they value most?

Explain that the quiz provides a fun way to introduce everyone to important aspects of American Baptist heritage; it's not expected that everyone will or should know the answers. Ask participants to answer the questions as best they can or work through the quiz together as a group. Make every effort to keep this cooperative rather than competitive. When the quiz has been completed review the answers [matching: 1) b, 2)e, 3)a, 4)c, 5)f, 6)d; fill in the blank: Obadiah Holmes, Helen Barrett Montgomery, Roger Williams, Sarah Boardman, Jitsuo Morikawa, Lulu Fleming, Joanna P. Moore, Santiago Soto-Fontanez, Isabel Crawford, Samuel DeWitt Proctor]. The response will help you gear the workshop presentation toward the needs of the group. Spend more time on areas of weakness and focus on the implications of Baptist history and emphases for our current situation for groups that have a strong knowledge base.

### III Small Group Research and Preparation (30 minutes)

Depending on the number of participants, divide into 3 or 6 smaller groups. The groups need be no larger than 2 or 3 people. Assign one (or two) of the six emphases to each group. Distribute Handouts B through G to the appropriate groups, explaining that one side of the handout describes the emphasis and on the other tells the story of a person whose life exemplified that emphasis. Invite them to read the handout(s) and develop a brief presentation for the rest of the group. Encourage them to be as creative as possible. They might stage a play or do an interview with the illustration person. They might do a "commercial" advertising the emphasis or prepare a children's story time to teach the emphasis. Remind them to keep the focus on the emphasis, rather than on the person's life in the illustration.

#### **IV Presentations (30 minutes)**

Reconvene, distribute Handout H for note-taking, and ask each group to share its presentation. Give words of affirmation after each presentation and allow a few minutes for discussion.

#### **V Implications for Our Church (10 minutes)**

Ask participants to reflect on ways in which Baptist emphases impact their own congregations. The following might be helpful for guiding the discussion:

- In what ways do these emphases appear in your church?
- How do they make your church different from other congregations?
- Does having a church covenant rather than a creed reflect any of the emphases?
- What emphasis might account for the central role that preaching plays in worship?
- In what ways does the priesthood of all believers make a difference in roles/expectations for clergy and laity in the life of your church?

#### **VI Closing (5 minutes)**

Briefly review the material covered during the workshop. Revisit the question, “What do you like most about being a Baptist?” Point out the resource listing on the back of Handout H and encourage participants to explore more about Baptist identity.

Conclude the workshop with prayer thanking God for the richness of our Baptist heritage, asking God for insight and courage to remain true to this heritage.

Written by Jeffrey D. Jones, 1995, revised 2006

## BAPTIST HERITAGE QUIZ

Connect the Baptist emphasis (left column) with its description (right column).

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. Soul Freedom                                 | a. the right of each local church to order its practice and ministry  |
| 2. Religious Liberty                            | b. the right and responsibility of each person to stand before God and make decisions about his or her relationship with God  |
| 3. Congregational Autonomy                      | c. the belief that each person can go directly to God without the need of an intermediary and that each person has a call from God to ministry in the church and/or world |
| 4. Priesthood of All Believers                  | d. the belief that a person must make a conscious commitment to Christ based in the experience of Christ's transforming power in their own lives before they are baptized |
| 5. The Bible as Sole Rule of Faith and Practice | e. the belief that true faith depends on the absence of any coercion from others, including the government  |
| 6. Believer's Baptism                           | f. the belief that the Bible alone claims authority for the conduct of our lives and churches   |

**FILL IN THE BLANK**

*from these choices: Roger Williams, Isabel Crawford, Joanna P. Moore, Jitsuo Morikawa, Obadiah Holmes, Samuel DeWitt Proctor, Lulu Fleming, Helen Barrett Montgomery, Santiago Soto-Fontanez, Sarah Boardman.*

\_\_\_\_\_ : A 17<sup>th</sup> century Baptist leader from Rhode Island who was whipped in Massachusetts for conducting a worship service in a friend's home.

\_\_\_\_\_ : The first woman president of American Baptists, she also translated the New Testament into modern English.

\_\_\_\_\_ : Although he was one of the founders of the First Baptist Church in America, he only remained a Baptist for a few months.

\_\_\_\_\_ : A missionary to Burma with her first husband, she later married Adoniram Judson.

\_\_\_\_\_ : Following his internment in a World War II camp, he developed a keen sense of the need to evangelize institutions as well as people.

\_\_\_\_\_ : The first African-American female missionary, she went to medical school during her return to the US due to illness so she could expand her ministry when she returned to Africa.

\_\_\_\_\_ : Instrumental in establishing work with freed slaves, she focused especially on ways to develop a strong family life.

\_\_\_\_\_ : Born in Puerto Rico, he served as a missionary in Mexico before moving to New York and assuming a prominent role among his colleagues, especially in education.

\_\_\_\_\_ : Her effective mission work among Native Americans ended in a controversy with local pastors about serving communion.

\_\_\_\_\_ : He served effectively as a professor, educator, college president, and government official.

## SOUL FREEDOM

Soul freedom lies at the very heart of what makes us Baptists. Our belief in believer's baptism, in religious liberty, in the priesthood of believers--all the fundamental Baptist emphases--rests on the foundation of soul freedom. Simply put, it is the right and responsibility of each person to stand before God and make decisions about his or her relationship with God.

This belief in soul freedom explains our lack of reliance on creeds and the diversity that exists within and among Baptist churches. Its practice in our congregational and denominational life is also what permits the Holy Spirit to work in our midst, to open new possibilities for us, to lead us into new ways of being and doing, new ways of faithfulness.

Rightly understood, soul freedom is not rampant individualism, although it puts great emphasis on the individual. It is rather the placing of oneself in the hands of God, sometimes through the community of faith, sometimes all alone, but always seeking to submit to God's will.

The word *soul* is particularly difficult. Its meaning today seems limited to the "religious" aspect of a person. When Baptists first began to talk about soul freedom, however, soul meant much more. They understood it to mean the very core of our being, that central part of us that provides the true essence of who we are as persons. The core is free, early Baptists maintained, as a matter of fact. Not, it *should* be free. Not, there *should* be laws guaranteeing its freedom. But, it *is* free. This is the way God created us, each with a free soul. It is in this freedom that individuals develop their relationship with their Creator. It is through this freedom that people really discover who they are meant to be, who God intended them to be.

This means that soul freedom isn't license to do anything or be anybody. Rather, it is the freedom to discover and respond to the call of God in each person's life, a freedom to find and follow the will and way of God. Baptists have always recognized that this is something no one can determine for or dictate to another. There are two important implications of soul freedom for Baptists: 1) We resist anything which seems oppression of freedom of soul. 2) We insist on anything which seemed the expression of the freedom. It is soul freedom that leads us to resist government involvement in religion, so that each person is free to pray or not and in any manner he or she will. It is soul freedom that leads us to insist on congregational government so that there is no hierarchy imposing its will or its understanding of God's truth upon others.

Working all of this out in a context of differing values, divergent understandings of God's will, and different interpretations of God's Word is always difficult. There are no set answers. Even today the attempt to do this creates intense conversations, sometimes even conflict, within churches and our denomination. The principle remains, however. Soul freedom is at the very core of what it means to be a Baptist.

## PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

Put simply, the priesthood of all believers is the conviction that “every Christian is a priest before God and to the world”<sup>1</sup>

Being a priest before God means that each one of us stands before God directly. There is no need for intermediaries, no one to tell us what we must believe about God or how we must relate to God. Each one of us receives the blessings of salvation and grace directly from God. Each one of us is accountable directly to God for our life and faith. It also means that each of us, as a believer, is capable of performing traditional priestly functions – from hearing the confession of others and offering God’s forgiveness to providing leadership for a service of communion.

Being a priest to the world means that each one of us is called by God to a ministry within the world. We are God’s representatives, God’s agents, bringing God’s love to the world.

The priesthood of all believers has particular reference to the relationship between laity and clergy in a Baptist church. It announces an equality before God that lifts up a shared sense of ministry. If there is a differentiation, it is one of the role we are called to play, not importance or power or even prestige. Ordination, in this sense, is a setting apart only in so far as it is the church saying to one of its own, “We see you are gifted to play a role of leadership within the church. This will be your ministry.” Ordained clergy are not essentially different from the laity.

This means that each of us in the church has been given the gift of ministry. All who follow Christ are called to minister on his behalf--in their homes, on their jobs, within the community, and beyond. While there may be some distinction between the roles of laity and clergy--all members are ministers, not all are pastors--Baptists have no priestly class.

The priesthood of all believers has far-reaching consequences for every Baptist. It means that none of us can be a spectator who sits back while others carry on the work of the church. Nor should any of us be willing to forfeit our responsibilities as ministers and expect the pastor to pick up the slack. As Baptists, we have no hierarchy within our churches.

1. *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Priesthood of All Believers* edited by Walter B. Shurden, Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1993, p. 2.

## CONGREGATIONAL AUTONOMY

For Baptists, the local congregation is the key. This local congregation is representative of the whole church of Jesus Christ. It is free to govern its own affairs, to order its worship, to decide how and with which other churches it will relate. And yet, Baptist churches are not just isolated congregations. From the earliest times we have seen the need to gather in associations to do things we cannot do alone and to seek counsel and advice from each other. There have been times these two realities have created tension among us as we have sought to balance them appropriately in the midst of sometimes contentious issues. The principles remain valid, however. It is those principles that are the focus of this session.

Congregational autonomy is, in the words of William Keucher, former president of the American Baptist Churches, USA, “the right of each congregation (1) to choose its own ministers and officers, (2) to establish its own covenant membership and discipline and confessions, (3) to order its life in its own organizational forms with its constitution and bylaws, (4) to implement its right to belong to other denominational agencies and ecumenical church bodies, (5) to own and to control its own property and budget.”<sup>1</sup>

What this means is that every Baptist congregation has great freedom to be the church it believes God has called it to be. It is free to determine its corporate life and its relationships with others. We believe that it is this grounding that brings life to the church and enables it to faithfully respond to God’s call to ministry both within its own walls and to the world. There is no pre-determined hierarchical system that dictates to congregations. There are no bishops, no outside controlling groups. Each congregation can set its standards for membership, determine its structure and organization, and decide upon its style of worship. Certainly there is much in common among Baptist churches in these areas, but each congregation is free to change as it understands God’s will for itself.

With this freedom, however, comes great responsibility. It is the responsibility of being the church—of listening for and responding to God’s call so that the congregation will remain faithful in its life and ministry. No one can tell a local Baptist congregation what it must be and do except God. It is the congregation’s responsibility to listen and obey when God speaks. This means each local congregation needs to develop a listening stance, refusing to be so caught up in its own issues and survival that it cannot hear the voice of God. It means it must constantly be open to change, willing to move in new directions when God calls. It means that it must be willing to risk, seeing and doing things differently from others because of its sense of God’s will for them. Each local congregation has this responsibility. It cannot rely on bishops or outside structures to tell it what to do in order to be faithful. It must claim the responsibility of faithfulness on its own.

1. “Congregational Autonomy” by William F. Keucher, *Baptist Leader*, March 1976, p. 49.

## RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

From early colonial days Baptists have worked to establish and maintain religious freedom. It hasn't always been easy. Our Baptist forebears were whipped and imprisoned. Even today many advocates of this Baptist emphasis are criticized and ridiculed. But the consistent Baptist witness has been for freedom. When Baptists speak of religious liberty, they mean that decisions about faith and one's relationship with God are for the individual to make, not the state. Baptists believe that the church can maintain its purpose and integrity best if it exists free from government interference, whether that is supportive or hostile.

Early Baptists didn't see things in the usual and customary way. They had different notions than most people about what it meant to be faithful and how to respond to Christ's claims on their lives. And they often got into trouble with the authorities. It was this experience that shaped the Baptist understanding of religious freedom. By the grace of God, we were able to use this experience to forge an understanding of freedom. So often before, similar religious persecution had led only to the establishment of a new authority seeking to impose its will on others. Baptists sought, instead, to provide freedom for all religious beliefs and expressions.

One traditional rationale for separation of church and state was held by Enlightenment thinkers such as Jefferson and Madison. Essentially secular in nature, this view supports a "high wall of separation" in order to keep religion from intruding into the lives of individuals through government action.

There is, however, a second rationale for religious freedom -- one that is evangelical in its approach. This view is based in our historic Baptist principle of soul freedom. Soul freedom is the right and responsibility of the individual to stand before God and make decisions regarding his or her relationship with God. In this view the purpose of separation of church and state is not to protect persons *from* religion but to protect them *for* religion. Its purpose is to enable the unfettered development of faith. It seeks to protect both the individual Christian and the church from interference from the state that can thwart vital and vibrant faith.

The secular view of separation, for example, objects to state mandated prayer out of a concern that prayer not be imposed on those who don't believe in it. The evangelical view of separation objects to state mandated prayer because it believes firmly in the value, meaning, and power of prayer and refuses to let the state determine what prayer is and when it should happen.

This has been the historic Baptist view of the need for separation of church and state. It has placed us in the company of those who have a much more secular view of life than we do. It has opened us to attacks that we are not truly "religious" or that we do not care about faith. But its foundation rests firmly in the fact that we take faith very seriously, so seriously that we are highly suspicious of any apart from the church who would attempt to define what it is and tell us how to practice it.

## BELIEVER'S BAPTISM

We can clearly affirm a strong Baptist tradition regarding baptism. It is for those who have experienced the saving power of Jesus Christ in their lives. It is for those who understand the nature of the commitment they make in promising to follow in the way of Christ because their lives have been transformed by Christ. From the day in 1609 when John Smyth baptized himself and a small band of believers in Holland to form the first Baptist church this is what we have affirmed. It sounds very much like the baptism experienced by this Ethiopian official in a stream along side a wilderness road. This passage illustrates several key features of our Baptist understanding of baptism.

*We believe in the baptism of believers.* The searching, questioning, seeking to understand that the Ethiopian demonstrates is a model for us. Conscious commitment to Christ as Lord and Savior is possible only after important questions of life and faith have been asked and answered, only after the individual can affirm that the answers of the gospel are the answers that will shape his or her life. Just as the Ethiopian made a conscious decision based in his belief about Christ and then asked to be baptized, we affirm that all who seek baptism must be able to do the same. All of this assumes a maturity that enables the individual to make both decisions and commitments.

*We affirm baptism as a human response to God's action.* God has acted in Jesus Christ to save us. That is what Philip explained to the Ethiopian; that is the essential message of the gospel we share. That action is an invitation to us -- an invitation to faith in this God who in great love makes the sacrifice that brings salvation to us. Baptism is our response to that invitation. God offers us forgiveness of sins; baptism is the sign that we have accepted that offer. God gives the gift of new life in Jesus Christ; baptism is the sign that we have accepted that gift. God calls us to live lives worthy of the gift that we have been given; baptism is the sign that we have accepted that call.

*We practice baptism by immersion.* This passage does not provide the details of the form of baptism used by Philip, but the indications are there for us. They "went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. . . . they came up out of the water." There seems to have been a substantial amount of water here! That, coupled with the literal meaning of baptize as "to submerge," provides strong biblical support for our practice. In addition, Baptists have also found support for the practice of immersion in that it is the only form of baptism which clearly demonstrates the dying to the old life and rising again to new life in Christ which is the experience of those who seek baptism.

## THE BIBLE

You've likely heard the old adage that when two or more Baptists are gathered, there are sure to be three or more opinions. Baptists are a fiercely individualistic lot, delightfully diverse and rich in variety. We've long insisted that there is no mediator but Christ that stands between us and God, that no pastor or denominational executive can speak for us on matters of faith. Our Baptist forebears struggled to secure the right of each individual, guided by the Holy Spirit, to make up their own minds about what they believe.

But what draws Baptists together in all these affirmations is our belief that the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God -- a trustworthy, authoritative, all-sufficient source for Christian living. Historian Robert G. Torbet wrote about this commitment to the Scriptures in his book *A History of the Baptists*: "It may be observed that Baptists, to a greater degree than any other group, have strengthened the protest of evangelical Protestantism against traditionalism. This they have done by their constant witness to the supremacy of the Scriptures as the all-sufficient and sole norm for faith and practice in the Christian life. All through the history of the Christian church, there have been minority groups who have sought to restrict the basis for church doctrine and polity to biblical teaching. Accordingly, such spiritual forebears of Baptists as Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, and John Huss, challenged the extra-biblical practices of celebrating the sacrifice of the mass for the dead, of granting indulgences for sins yet to be committed, of encouraging sacred pilgrimages, worship of the saints, and an excessive emphasis upon ritualism. For their pains, they were persecuted severely by a church which accepted the principle that tradition occupies a position of equal authority with the Scriptures." (*A History of the Baptists* by Robert G. Torbet, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1973, p. 513).

Baptists are in a very real sense "people of the Book." It is to the Bible we turn when we have questions that need answering – about the church, about ministry, about the way God's people are to conduct themselves. Without discounting the importance of tradition, we have consistently maintained that it always takes a back seat to the Bible on matters of faith and practice.

## IMPORTANT BAPTIST EMPHASES

**Soul Freedom**

**The Bible**

**Congregational Autonomy**

**Priesthood of All Believers**

**Believers Baptism**

**Religious Liberty**

## BAPTIST HERITAGE RESOURCES

Brackney, William H. *Baptist Life and Thought: A Source Book*. Revised. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1998. Uses primary source documents from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries to provide insight into important Baptist beliefs.

Freeman, Curtis W., James Wm. McClendon, Jr., and C. Rosalee Velloso da Silva. *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999. Primarily an examination of Baptist theology, this study contains selected and excerpted historical documents relevant to the development of the Baptist movement and of Baptist denominations.

Goodwin, Everett, *Down by the Riverside* (2002) and *Down by the Riverside Study Guide* (2006). Provides a basic orientation to Christian faith as practiced by Baptist believers. Those who use the study guide and book together will not only get an overview of Baptist history, but they will come to a renewed appreciation for uniquely Baptist principles and perspectives.

Jones, Jeffrey D. *Keepers of the Faith: Illustrated Biographies from Baptist History*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999. One-page stories of eighty important Baptists told through captioned illustrations. Can be reproduced for use as bulletin inserts or handouts.

Jones, Jeffrey D. and Debra L. Sutton. *We Are Baptists: Studies for Youth*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999.

Jones, Jeffrey D. and Debra L. Sutton. *We Are Baptists: Studies for Younger Children*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000.

Jones, Jeffrey D. *We Are Baptists: Studies for Older Children*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000.

Jones, Jeffrey D. *We Are Baptists: Studies for Adults*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2001. Each of these four volumes contains 14 session plans on topics of importance to Baptists. They include sessions on the six key emphases discussed in this workshop.

*People with a Mission*. Video. A video version of a classic filmstrip that tells the story of American Baptists. Includes a study guide.

Skoglund, John. *The Baptists*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1967. A booklet that provides a statement of commonly accepted Baptist doctrines.

*All resources may be ordered by calling 1-800-4-JUDSON or online at [www.judsonpress.com](http://www.judsonpress.com).*