

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Baptist Church

The name "Baptist" comes from the Baptist practice of immersion in water. It was coined in the seventeenth century by opponents to the new movement but rejected by followers themselves. It wasn't until the nineteenth century that Baptists accepted the use of the label to describe themselves.

The roots of the Baptist movement date back to the sixteenth century and the post-Reformation period, although the first Baptist congregation appeared in 1609 in Holland. It was here that the Church of England minister, John Smyth, performed a radical and scandalous act of baptising himself by pouring water on his head. He then baptised his fellow reformer, Thomas Helwys and other members of the congregation.

Smyth and Helwys had left England for Holland in 1607 after being persecuted for wanting to purify the Church of England of all traces of Roman Catholicism. Both Smyth and Helwys had joined a group of "Separatists" in Gainsborough in 1606. Their three core beliefs went on to shape later Baptists. They were:

The Bible, not church tradition or religious creed, was the guide in all matters of faith and practice.

The church should be made up of believers only, not all people born in the local parish.

The church should be governed by those believers, not by hierarchical figures like bishops.

In 1612 Helwys and others returned to England to establish the first Baptist Church on English soil. Baptists initially developed in two streams of theological thought:

1. General Baptists believed that when Christ died on the cross, he died for everyone in general.
2. Particular Baptists followed the Calvinist tradition of believing that Christ died for a particular group or elect.

These two groups eventually came together in 1813 to form a "General Union" which eventually became the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland in the late nineteenth century.

Throughout the seventeenth century Baptists were persecuted for their beliefs, being known as "non-conformists" or Dissenters. They refused to become members of the Church of England, saying Christ and not the monarch was head of the Church. The nineteenth century saw a period of significant growth for the Baptist movement. Great preachers such

as Charles Haddon Spurgeon in London and Alexander Maclaren in Manchester drew crowds in their thousands.

In terms of beliefs, Baptists share the Trinitarian tradition of all the major Christian denominations. However, there are a few differences. In the Baptist movement everyone is equal. There is no hierarchy of bishops or priests exercising authority over members. Baptists reject the idea that authority flows down from previous church leaders which can be traced back to the apostles in apostolic succession.

Baptists are congregational: each church is self-governing and self-supporting, made up of members, each with a role to play. The churches encourage those attending to become church members through baptism. This entitles them to vote at the church meeting where all decisions are made. Final authority rests not with the minister or deacons but with church members at the meeting. It appoints ministers, elders, deacons and others who take a leadership role, agree financial policy and determine mission strategy.

Despite their autonomy, local Baptist churches have always come together in regional, national and international associations for support and fellowship. Baptists believe that churches should not live in isolation but be interdependent.

Technically there is no such thing as a Baptist denomination. The organisation has a "bottom up" rather than "top down" approach. However, in the UK most Baptist churches belong to the Baptist Union. This isn't a central authority but a central resource for assisting churches.

As each Baptist church is autonomous there can be no outside interference in decision making. This applies to any secular power, such as the state, being involved in church matters. Therefore, Baptists reject the idea of an established or state church.

Baptists are famous for their tradition of full immersion baptisms. Most Baptist Churches have a baptistery which is basically a pool (about 4m by 3m) in the church. During a baptismal service the minister and the person being baptised enter the water. The minister, holding the person, will lay them back in the water so they are totally immersed, and then bring them back up again. Baptists believe this practice is in line with the New Testament practice of baptism, as carried out by John the Baptist.

Today Baptists form the fifth largest Christian church in the world. Baptist churches are found in almost every country in the world and have about 40 million members worldwide. In Britain 2,150 churches belong to the Baptist Union of Great Britain, between them having 150,000 members.

Further information

[Yorkshire Baptist Association](https://www.yba.org.uk)
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