

BAPTIST PRINCIPLES FOR THE CHURCH MEMBER

Norman C Ronne

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Scripture quotations

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About the Author

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Foreword

Norman Ronne has, in a very clear, concise and simple way, highlighted the principles which we, as Baptists, hold dear. It is written for the 'man/woman in the pew' and each principle is worthy of further study.

In dealing with local church conflicts, we often hear mention being made of Baptist Principles, which are not Baptist Principles at all, but rather local Church Constitutional By-Laws.

This booklet is an attempt to familiarise local church members with the traditional Baptist beliefs which form part of our Baptist heritage. They are, in fact, biblical principles.

Our grateful thanks go to Norman for an excellent and well-presented booklet.

Angelo Scheepers
General Secretary

April 2015

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INTRODUCTION

Baptists in South Africa have adopted seven Principles which we adhere to, and which set out clearly what we believe. The statements are introduced by a Preamble which itself contains our views on important issues. Baptist Principles and History are taught as a practical course at our Baptist theological colleges, and ministerial candidates are, for obvious reasons, required to have passed this course.

But what about ordinary church members - how much do we know about Baptist Principles?

It is probably true to say that many Baptists do not know what their denomination stands for. This may be due to neglect on either the part of the individual member or the church as a whole, or both. But it is important for us to know the Principles which guide our distinctive Baptist thinking and practice if we are members or even adherents of a local Baptist Church. We need to be able to explain them to the countless other church groups if they ask us, as well as to be able to refute error when we encounter it.

This booklet has been written for church members to be able to gain an understanding of our Baptist Principles, for the reasons stated above. Baptist Principles are not dry and dusty topics; they are at the heart of our living evangelical faith, and based on our understanding of the Bible, the living Word of God. It is hoped that this booklet will be a blessing and a help to you as a church member or leader, in your ministry in the church and your outreach to the world around you.

Short Baptist history

Baptists in South Africa trace their origins back to the English Separatist movement, although there had been contact between the State-established Church of England and the radical Anabaptists in the Continent. We cannot trace our origins back to the New Testament, as some churches claim to do, but genealogy or pedigree is of relatively little importance. What is important is commitment to the principles and teachings of Christ and his apostles as recorded in the New Testament.

From the time of the colonisation of the Cape, Dutch and English churches had taken root. Moravian missionaries had also established churches for the indigenous population.

The Baptist work in South Africa traces back to first English settlers in 1820 who landed in the Western Cape, and then German settlers in the 1850's who settled in the Eastern Cape. The English settlers came as a result of several factors including unemployment, land shortage and a sense of adventure. Baptists joined a group of Wesleyans and landed at Algoa Bay in the Cape in 1820. William Miller acted as a tent-maker pastor until William Davies was sent from England. The work spread to Grahamstown and then Cape Town and Johannesburg. English speaking Baptists held to open communion and autonomy of the local church.

The German settlers who came in the 1850's included a number of Baptists including Carsten Langheim who founded a Baptist church at Frankfort. Carl Hugo Gutsche was sent by Oncken in 1867 and he built 25 churches in the

border area. Despite dissensions, the work grew. In 1886 J D Odendaal founded the Afrikaanse Baptiste Kerk.

In 1873 the “Baptist Sustentation Fund” was established for home missions, and the Baptist Union of South Africa was formed in July 1877.

The South African Baptist Missionary society was formed in 1892.

For further reading on the history of Baptists in South Africa, I refer you to Sydney Hudson-Reed’s books “By Water and Fire”, “Together for as Century” and “By Taking Heed”, and books by Dr Chris Parnell.

Denominational differences

Denominational differences arise because different groups interpret the scriptures in different ways. Baptists hold particular beliefs and practices because we see them in scripture. Some Baptist beliefs are shared by other groups, but others are rejected by them either on theological grounds or for practical or other reasons. We do not claim to have a monopoly of the truth, but must be true to our convictions. We see our denomination as a Union of like-minded autonomous churches which identify and co-operate with each other.

We also co-operate with other evangelical groups where appropriate.

It is our Baptist Principles taken **as a whole** that distinguish us from other denominations and religious groups. These Principles come out of the following influences:

- The Reformation on the continent and in England, which reacted against the corruption within the Roman Catholic church and superficiality in the Anglican church, and emphasised justification by faith
- The English parish church system whereby people within a geographical area were automatically regarded as members of the church, whether committed Christians or not.
- Church traditions that were not supported by scripture
- Lack of religious freedom that led to intolerance and persecution

- State involvement in the church's affairs

Baptist Principles, provoked by the historical context and developed by a searching study of Scripture are all interconnected and build upon each other. They have developed to form the present 7 specific Principles, including the preamble to the statements, shown as Appendix 1

It should also be noted that a "Statement of Belief" was passed at the Baptist Union Assembly at Durban in September 1924. This is really in the form of a doctrinal statement which sets out our evangelical faith and which would be shared by most evangelical groups. This is shown as Appendix 2.

(Preamble (Introduction) to the Statements).

“We as Baptists share many areas of our faith with other members of the professing Christian Church. These include a belief in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; in the supreme Lordship of Jesus Christ as Head of the Church; and in the Bible as the inspired Word of God, and as the final authority in all matters of faith and practice.”

One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Definition

Christianity is a monotheistic belief system i.e. we believe in one God, as taught in the Old Testament. (Exodus 20:3-6; Deuteronomy 6:4; James 2:19; 1 Corinthians 8:4, 6; 1 Timothy 2:5-6)

However, there are three persons who are God (1 Corinthians 8:6; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; John 1:1; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:63-65; Acts 5:3-4; John 16:8-11; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11); 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Matthew 28:19)

We share this belief with other evangelical groups ,as well as Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox churches, and reject the notion of a plurality of gods or the pantheistic idea that god is in everything.

The Supremacy of Scripture

Definition

The introductory remarks to the numbered Principles express a belief in;

“...the Bible as the inspired Word of God, and as the final authority in all matters of faith and practice.”

By inspiration, we mean the supernatural influence of God by his Holy Spirit, on the writers of the books of the Bible, so that their writings are an accurate portrayal of what God revealed to them. The writers were inspired, but this leads to the actual writings being inspired.

We share this belief with other evangelical groups.

Interpretation of the Scriptures

Over the years, different methods of interpreting Scripture have arisen, many of which are subjective and predisposed against the miraculous. The evangelical approach is generally to follow the historical-grammatical (grammatico-historical) method, where the aim is to discover the meaning of the passage as the original author would have intended and what the original hearers would have understood. The original passage is regarded as having only a single meaning or sense. As Milton S. Terry said: "A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture."

Many adopt the historical-grammatical approach using the inductive method, which involves a general three-fold approach to the text, being observation, interpretation, and application. Each step builds upon the other, and so they follow in order.

We should also take into account the context in which the writing takes place, figures of speech, literary forms and genres.

Exclusions

The Second London Confession declares”

“The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient certain and infallible rule for all saving knowledge, faith and obedience... Nothing is to be added, whether by new revelation of the spirit or traditions of men... The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself.”

(Infallible means incapable of erring, unailing.)

‘New revelations of the Spirit’ is specifically mentioned because of mystical groups like the Quakers who attached great importance to subjective experiences and new visions etc. There are several groups today who still place these revelatory experiences on a par with Scripture, rather than test them by Scripture.

‘Traditions of men’ is mentioned to counter the Roman Catholic practice of regarding their unwritten traditions as equal with Scripture.

Baptists, together with other evangelical groups, believe in the *inerrancy* of the Scriptures. By this we mean that the Bible is fully truthful in all of its teachings. This means, in effect, that it contains the complete revelation of the doctrine of God, affirming that the Scriptures are the final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

Scriptural claims

The Bible claims this supremacy for itself. It claims that God is above man and man can only know God as he reveals himself to man – he has done so over the years in different ways, culminating in his self-revelation through Jesus Christ (Hebrews: 1:1 ; Matthew 11:27 ; John1:18). God’s divine disclosure has been proclaimed and interpreted by the apostles with special authority (2 Corinthians10:8;1Thessalonians 2:13).These men finally perpetuated that authoritative disclosure in the written word of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21).

Historical confirmation

Historically, the after the apostles had passed on, the church followed the final authority of the Bible (Old and then New Testaments), rather than alleged new revelations from God.

CreeDs and Confessions

Baptists prefer not to use the word “Creed”, because in the popular mind it has come to mean a total and exclusive script that purports to be a complete statement of what Christians believe, and can discourage the independent

interpretation of Scripture. Having said that, we recognise that certain historic creeds (e.g. the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed) played a valuable role in defining biblical truth that was under attack at the time.

Baptists prefer to speak of a “Confession” or “Statement of Faith”. These do not claim to reflect the full truth of Scripture, but to summarise the church’s beliefs on some of the most important themes.

Practical application of the immediate authority of Scripture

The theological truth of the immediate authority of Scripture has practical consequences for us as Christians:

- The Holy Spirit interprets the Word of God only to open-minded and obedient seekers
- Scripture provides in itself the data and examples of the hermeneutical Principles necessary to ascertain the meaning of any particular portion
- “No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20). We should expose ourselves to insights from other Christians.
- Blessing comes not only from reading or hearing, but doing also (James 1:25). Obedience is the key to obtaining God’s blessing.

Numbered Baptist Principles

1 The Direct Lordship of Christ

“The DIRECT LORDSHIP OF CHRIST over every believer and over the local church. By this we understand that Christ exercises His authority over the believer and the local Church directly, without delegating it to another.”

From a divine viewpoint, the direct lordship of Christ is the basic presupposition underlying all the other Baptist Principles. It will become clear how it interacts with the other Principles.

From the human side, we may call it “the competency of the soul under God in religion.”

The distinguishing feature of this Baptist principle is our emphasis on Christ’s *direct* involvement in individuals and the church. He does not exercise his authority through intermediary authorities such as papal pronouncements, statements by popular leaders or creedal formulas.

At the Baptist World Alliance, J D Freedman stated “What distinguishes us Baptists as a family is our acute and vivid consciousness of the authority of Jesus Christ, and of his direct, personal and undelegated authority.”

The direct Lordship of Christ in the life of a Christian is spiritual, personal and voluntary.

Practically, this means that:

- Individuals cannot be related to him through the faith of their parents
- Christ does not involve himself by proxy in people's lives
- Ordination of officers (see Principle 5 dealing with church officers) is by local congregations directly led by the Holy Spirit rather than through apostolic succession
- The ordinances can be led by ordinary members/believers not necessarily an ordained minister.

As will be seen in the chapters on the other statements, the direct Lordship of Christ impacts our view on:

- The Church as a body of individual people redeemed by him to live under his direct control, as their Lord
- The priesthood of all believers who have direct access to their Lord, and who use their gifts given by Christ as Lord, to serve him in his church
- Freedom of conscience within the principle of religious liberty, where individuals are governed by their own convictions and conscience
- Congregationalism, where members of a local church appoint their own leaders, share the ministry and govern the church collectively but each under Christ's direction.

- Separation of church and state, where the local church, under the direct Lordship of Christ, is free of any state control or influence.

2 The Church

“The CHURCH, as the whole company of those who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. The local church, being a manifestation of the universal church, is a community of believers in a particular place where the Word of God is preached and observed. It is fully autonomous and remains so notwithstanding responsibilities it may accept by voluntary association.”

Nature of the church

In order to understand regenerate church membership, we need to look at the nature of the church. The Old Testament Hebrew word used is “*qahal*” which is a summons to an assembly. The word “*edah*” refers to a community centred in the law.

In the New Testament, the Greek word “*kuriakos*” means belonging to the Lord and “*ekklesia*” is a gathering or an assembly. When translating Hebrew into Greek, *ekklesia* is often used to translate *qahal*, but never to translate *edah*. *Ekklesia* is thus our major source of understanding the New Testament, and the apostle Paul uses it more than any other New Testament writer. Individual congregations are always referred to as the church, which is complete in any one place. The church universal, is of course comprised of all believers wherever they are.

In the Bible, the church is referred to as the *people of God* (2 Corinthians 6:16; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14), the *body of Christ* (Ephesians 1:22-23; 1 Corinthians 12:27) and the *temple of the Holy Spirit* (1 Corinthians 12:13; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:21-22; Galatians 5:22-23)

The two main issues here are *regenerate church membership* and *autonomy* of the local church.

Regenerate church membership

The Baptist principle of Regenerate Church Membership is linked to the belief in the spiritual nature of the Church (as described above), composed of those who have been born again by the Holy Spirit and have been brought to personal and saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. A living and direct acquaintance with Christ is therefore held to be basic to church membership. It developed out of the Puritan view that rejected the “parish church” concept and held that visible churches should consist of “visible saints”, meaning people who can give credible witness to regeneration. The London Confession, adopted by seven Baptist churches in 1644, articulated the Baptist view.

Biblical support is found firstly in the book of Acts where church members are described as “devoted to prayer”, “disciples”, “those who received the word”, “being saved” etc. The Epistles are addressed to those consistent with being regenerate members (e.g. God’s beloved, saints, faithful etc.). The NT also often distinguishes regenerate and unregenerate, e.g. Romans 6:17-18, 1 John 5:19.

We can try to achieve it only through our best human procedures and efforts. We cannot see into people's hearts and can only thus use our best human methods to try to determine if the person gives credible evidence of being born again of God's Spirit. These methods will include biblical preaching and teaching by the church, specific teaching in baptism classes and the candidate's responses and observation of the person's personal testimony and lifestyle.

This principle is of the utmost importance. If we do not insist on it, the effect on the church would be serious. How can unregenerate members know the mind of the Holy Spirit and be led to do Christ's will? It is important that the members who control the church, fellowship, ministry etc. should be born again. While regenerate membership does not guarantee a trouble-free church, it is important to follow biblical teaching regarding the church as we understand it.

Opposing views

The Covenant community idea, the idea that the wheat and tares must be allowed to grow together (Matthew 13:25ff). Here there is no attempt to determine the spiritual state of individual members because in such churches the christened children of members are often absorbed into the membership without having repented and received Christ as Saviour for themselves.

The Roman Catholic idea that members baptised in their church make them Christians who constitute the church of God. Again, the spiritual state of the individual is irrelevant.

Autonomy of the local church

Baptists believe that each individual congregation is a local expression of the universal church. Since the local church is comprised of redeemed people who are under the direct Lordship of Christ, it is not subject to any outside authority.

Autonomy of the local church is closely related to Congregationalism, where we will discuss some of the difficulties that arise from this doctrine.

When we look at Congregationalism we will also see how this plays out in church government.

3 The Ordinances

Believers' baptism

BELIEVERS' BAPTISM as an act of obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ and a sign of personal repentance, faith and regeneration; it consists of the immersion in water into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The three issues relating to baptism are the mode, the meaning and the subjects.

The mode

Both linguistic and biblical evidence show clearly that Christian baptism in the New Testament is by total immersion in water. The consistent primary and literal meaning of the Greek word "*baptizo*" is "to dip" or "to immerse" in a physical act of dipping. This is confirmed by Greek lexicons and theological dictionaries. Our English word baptize is a transliteration of the Greek word to avoid the correct translation of *baptizo*, which would have been offensive to King James 1 who commissioned the King James version.

The mode of baptism by dipping is evidenced by the story in Acts 8:26-39 of the Ethiopian eunuch being baptised by Philip, as well as other stories.

Other modes of baptism, practised by churches that baptise infants, are sprinkling and effusion (pouring water on the head).

The meaning

The meaning of Christian baptism is clear from the New Testament. Romans 6:3-7 shows that the immersion and emergence in baptism have a clear symbolic association

with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The main significance of baptism is a profession of faith in and union with Christ (Romans 6:3-4, 1 Cor. 10; 12:12-13, Gal. 3:26-27, Col. 2:12. The believer has died to sin and rises to a new life in Christ. It also symbolises entry into the body of Christ and is a witness to conversion. Baptism is an initiation into the church of those who have become Christians (Galatians 3:27-28), to be followed by walking in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

In the second and third centuries, Christian parents worried about the souls of their children who died young before they could believe and be baptised. Because of the close association of baptism with regeneration (based on their interpretation of John 3:5, Acts 2:38 and 1 Peter 3:21), the growing belief that spiritual change could be accomplished by external rituals, and the increasing power of the clergy in spiritual matters, baptism was brought forward to the earliest time in a child’s life. Colossians 2:11-12 was interpreted to support this by equating Christian baptism with Jewish circumcision which was performed eight days after birth. Centuries later, this was incorporated into covenant theology (see below)

Infant baptism is the current practice of the Roman Catholic Church, which is rejected by Baptists. Luther initially saw baptism as a symbolic reflection of the gospel but after clashes with Zwingli he moved to a more sacramental position. Calvin enlarged on the concept of baptism stressing its nature as a seal of God’s operation in a person’s life. The early Baptist confession emphasised

baptism as being an external sign of repentance and the remission of sin and of dying and being made alive. This was confirmed by the London Baptist Confession of 1644.

The subjects

From the above, the subjects of baptism are clearly those who received the message of the gospel and believed. This is why Baptists insist on believers' baptism – it is for those who can give credible evidence of repentance and salvation. Believers' baptism is not only for adults – children can be baptised provided they can think in abstract terms and understand the symbolism of baptism, and of course give evidence of having believed in Christ as their personal Saviour.

Infant baptism is ruled out since infants cannot repent and believe. As noted above, infant baptism became widely practised in the second and third centuries because of the belief that if infants died without being baptised they would go to hell.

Baptism under Covenant Theology

This needs to be mentioned since there are Reformed Christians who baptise infants. This is based on the argument that just as children of Hebrew parents were included in the old covenant, so children of believers are included in the new covenant, but baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign for this. They use Colossians 2:11-12, and Acts 2:38-39. However, Baptists believe that in Colossians Paul does not equate circumcision and baptism but uses them as two different figures of the effects of

Christ's fullness. In Acts 2, verse 41 clarifies the position "Those who accepted his message were baptised."

The accounts of household baptisms in Acts are also used to support infant baptism, but there is no evidence that these included infants, and there is every reason to believe that only those who believed were baptised.

Paedo-baptists believe that baptism brings infants of believing parents under the grace of the covenant and they still need to make a personal commitment to Christ in the future. This may well lead to complications in the life of the child in the church.

Practical issues

- Who can baptise? Baptists believe that any church member can conduct a baptism service.
- How can we be sure the candidate is a believer? See the section on regenerate church membership. If there is doubt as to their spiritual standing or understanding of the meaning of baptism, rather postpone it
- Where can the baptism be performed? Usually in the baptismal font in the church, but can be in any suitable place such as a swimming pool or a river (subject to taking every safety precaution), or even a bath.

The Lord's Supper

Please note that there is no Baptist principle for the Lord's Supper, but it is dealt with here because we believe that Christ gave only two Ordinances – believers' baptism and the Lord's Supper. Our views on the Lord's Supper differ from many other groups, and are mentioned in the Statement of Belief in Appendix 2.

The basis for the Lord's Supper is the account in the gospels where Jesus ate the last supper with his disciples, as well as 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. In the gospel accounts, Jesus took the bread and wine and likened them to his body broken and his blood shed. (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:14-22). In Luke 22:19 Jesus said "...do this in remembrance of me". In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul shows the practice of the church remembering the death of Jesus as he commanded.

For Baptists, the Lord's Supper is simply a remembrance and signifies the fellowship of the church (1 Corinthians 10:17). This is vastly different to the belief of the Roman Catholic Church's belief in *transubstantiation* (the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ), and Lutheran's belief in *consubstantiation* (Christ becomes physically present in and around the consecrated elements). The Swiss reformer Zwingli emphasised the *memorial nature* of the Lord's Supper, and Calvin emphasised the *symbolic nature* in which God was regarded to reaffirm his grace to the recipients. Modern Baptists follow these last two views on the Lord's Supper. When Jesus said "This is my body...this is my blood" this could not have been meant literally because he was still in his body with blood flowing through his veins. It is obvious that he was speaking figuratively.

Practical issues

Churches sometimes struggle with practical issues such as:

- How often should communion be held? A good answer is; not so often that it becomes commonplace, and not so seldom that it encourages superstition.
- At what age can a child participate? A similar rule should apply as with baptism. If the child has made a commitment to Christ and is old enough to understand abstract ideas and symbolism, he or she can partake. Parents should be encouraged not to let their children partake until the child fully understands the significance of the Lord's Table. It is disturbing to many Christians to see very young children frivolously partaking of Communion, and it takes away from the significance for the child. Rather wait until they have made a commitment to Christ and can understand what Communion is all about.
- How does one stop an unbeliever from partaking? This is very difficult to do. All the officiating minister can do is to emphasise that the table is for those who know and love the Lord as their personal Saviour. An invitation for personal counselling after the service for anyone who is not sure about this, could be made in an evangelistic manner.
- Can communion be held outside of the church building? There is no reason why communion cannot be celebrated at a church camp, old age home, at home in a family setting, when an ill believer would otherwise be deprived, at a cell group on any other appropriate occasion.

4 Congregationalism

“The principle of CONGREGATIONALISM, namely, that each member has the privilege and responsibility to use his/her gifts and abilities to participate fully in the life of the church. We recognize that God gifts His church with Pastors/Elders who primarily lead in a spirit of servanthood, equip and provide spiritual oversight, and with Deacons who primarily facilitate the smooth running of the church. This principle further recognizes that each member should participate in the appointment of the church's leaders, and that a constituted church meeting, subject to the direct Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture, is the highest court of authority for the local church.”

The principle of Congregationalism ties in closely with the supremacy of Scripture, the direct Lordship of Christ, and the Church being made up of redeemed people in autonomous local churches, and the priesthood of all believers. The statement was amended in 2000 to clarify the role of leaders within the church, because there is some tension between leadership and the concept of Congregationalism.

Mutual ministry

Every member has both a privilege and responsibility to use their gifts and abilities to participate fully in the life of the church in mutual ministry. This is covered more fully under the priesthood of all believers.

Leadership

Leaders in the form of Pastors/Elders and Deacons are God's gift to the church, but must lead in a spirit of servanthood. This concept originates with the ministry of our Lord Jesus in loving service to others and his washing of the

disciples feet. Pastors/Elders provide spiritual oversight, and the Deacons should facilitate the smooth running of the church.

Every member has the right to participate in the appointment of church leaders.

The church, through its collective membership, prayerfully and submitting to the direct Lordship of Christ, appoints leaders that it believes are given by God to help it in its internal and external ministries (see 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1). Leaders should be respected and encouraged in their work of leading by example and equipping the members for service.

(For more details of the leaders' functions in the church, see the next principle, Priesthood of all believers.)

Church government

Notwithstanding the recognition of leaders as described above, government is in the hands of the members voting in general meeting, always under the Lord Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and always subject to the teaching of Scripture as their supreme written authority.

In essence, therefore, a duly constituted church meeting is the highest court of authority (final appeal) for the local church and its members.

Autonomy in context

As South African Baptists, we need to note that the idea of absolute autonomy was foreign to the thinking of our spiritual ancestors in Europe. For them, the concept of independence was mainly from state control over ecclesiastical affairs. The authentic Baptist view may best be described as "autonomous but inter-dependent". There was never any idea of isolationism as we find amongst

Baptist churches today. Both the London Confession and the American Philadelphia Confession of 1742 emphasise that it is both the prerogative and necessity of local congregations to have inter-congregational fellowship. This fellowship is for mutual edification and counsel in the affairs of the church including worship and discipline. It can be extremely helpful to each congregation in matters such as training, evangelism, foreign missions social concern and responding to existing and changing structures in society. When resources are pooled, churches can be much more effective than when they do things alone. Congregations can still be autonomous while co-operating.

In our South African context, our regional associations as well as the Baptist Union of South Africa should be supported as far as possible. The Baptist Union through the Annual Assembly has issued statements on social concerns and Baptist church issues for the help and guidance of the individual churches. If the regional associations or the BU itself are not functioning as they should at any stage, individual churches should try to take any necessary action to make them more effective, rather than writing them off and going it alone.

The old adage “United we stand, divided we fall” is still true.

Alternative models

Congregationalism is followed by several groups, including Baptists, but there are other major models:

Episcopalian – the key figure is the bishop with power to admit members and ordain people to “the ministry”. The most extreme example is the Roman Catholic church with the Pope at the top and supposedly a direct successor to the Apostle Peter

Presbyterian – the local church is governed by an authority outside of itself (called the “Presbytery”), consisting of elders of several congregations, including its own

Ruling elders – this model has arisen in many large, mainly charismatic churches. The church may be autonomous of outside authority, but the power and government of the church is in the hands of a plurality of elders/pastors

Baptists acknowledge that congregationalism has potential problems and runs the risk of being misapplied. It can, for example, lead to delayed decision-making and implementation of decisions. Unspiritual people can frustrate God’s leading in the local church. However, we believe it is most consistent with what we see in the New Testament church, and it offers the opportunity of a true community of believers in mutual ministry and Spirit-led fellowship, which is an organism rather than an organisation.

The alternative models of church government have as many if not more potential problems. In the Episcopalian model family members or friends can easily be appointed to succeed the key figure. The Presbyterian system can override local conditions and needs. And where there are ruling elders, they can dominate the church and side-line members who disagree with them.

5 Priesthood of all believers

“The PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS, by which we understand that each Christian has direct access to God through Christ our High Priest, and shares with Him in His work of reconciliation. This involves intercession, worship, faithful service and bearing witness to Jesus Christ, even to the end of the earth.”

This principle states that all the members in the church have a priestly role to approach God direct and to intercede to God on behalf of others. It also emphasises that the ministry of the church belongs to the entire congregation and we all have a mandate to minister. There is no separate order of priests, since the ministry is a gift from the Spirit to the church. It is an office involving the inward call of God and the commission of the church.

Mutual ministry

If the principle of the Priesthood of all Believers is operating in a local Baptist Church, it will mean all members ministering to each other and to outsiders according to their giftings. This is the principle of Mutual Ministry. The principle has been stifled because of the false distinction between clergy and laity and the idea that the work must all be done by trained ministers. The biblical role of the church consists of worship, edification, evangelism and social concern, and its ministries follow on from its role. At the heart of the ministry of the church, is the gospel, the good news of God's love and grace to mankind and his redeeming activities. The principle of the direct lordship of Christ means that ordinary members can even officiate at the two ordinances, Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The question may then be asked as to the role of leaders in the church. This has been covered in part when we looked at Congregationalism. Over the years, the two offices in Baptist churches gradually crystallised into that of the pastor as an elder-overseer-shepherd (these terms are used inter-changeably in Acts 20:17; 1 Peter 5:1-2; and Titus 1:5-7), and deacon.

Pastor (elder-overseer-shepherd)

Contrary to some past practices, the *distinctive function* of a pastor is not to be found in certain practices like teaching or preaching (although they will do these things in achieving their objectives), but in a role beyond these activities. This role is to lead the congregation to achieve its God-given goals with its God-given gifts, by "...preparing them for works of service." (Ephesians 4:12). There are three distinct functions in this:

- * precipitating decision-making by alerting the congregation to opportunities and challenges.
- * preparing for action by equipping the members to play their part
- * co-ordinating the functions of the congregation towards the church's goals by helping them to keep the goals in sight.

Two extremes are to be avoided – for the pastor to be a dictator (which causes the members to be submissive but stunted in their growth) or a doormat (rendering him unable to lead with God-given authority).

(See also “Leadership” under “Congregationalism” and the concept of ‘servant leadership’.

Deacon

There is not much teaching on the role of deacons, other than the qualifications listed in 1Timothy 3. The strong emphasis on spiritual qualities dispels any idea that the work of deacons is only related to material responsibilities and unimportant. In Acts 6, although the seven were appointed to distribute food, the Apostles looked for men who were “...full of the spirit and wisdom.” In some churches deacons serve as ministry team (department) leaders, as well as undertake such duties as counting money and assisting at the communion table.

If leaders in the church serve with a servant heart, and are respected and supported by the members, the tensions between the two will dissipate and lead to God’s blessing on the congregation.

6 Religious liberty

“The principle of RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, namely that no individual should be coerced either by the State or by any secular, ecclesiastical or religious group in matters of faith. The right of private conscience is to be respected. For each believer this means the right to interpret the Scriptures responsibly and to act in the light of his conscience.”

The right to choose

The Principles above are clear regarding every person's rights to private belief. In society, this means the right of each individual to choose what he or she believes and even to choose not to believe anything. Freedom is not unlimited as we are members of human society and we are limited by the rights of others. The principle of religious liberty is directly tied to the basic presuppositions of the direct lordship of Christ and the competency of the soul under God in religion. Baptists have been at the forefront in the fight for religious liberty, not only for the rights of their own group, but also for the rights of everyone else as well. We cannot have religious freedom for ourselves and deny it to Muslims, Hindus, atheists and all others!

Conscience

This principle has strong biblical grounds as the Scriptures say a lot about conscience, e.g. Acts 24:16, 1 Cor.4:4, 1 Cor. 8:7, 1Tim. 4:2, Romans 14:23, 2 Cor. 4:26, Matth.23:37. Conscience is usually a subjective indication of God's will, but is not infallible and is not static but changing. Many people's consciences need to be educated from Scriptural principles. Scripture is clear that we should

not violate our own conscience (however weak and misguided it may be), because “whatever is not from faith is sin.” If we cannot do something believing it to be right for us, we should not do it.

Those in error

With regard to other religious groups whom we believe to be in error, we must accept that we cannot force them to believe differently, and we cannot forcefully stop their religious activities. We must allow them the freedom of conscience that we claim for ourselves. However, freedom of conscience is consistent with resisting error, and we must do so, but with truth by persuasion rather than persecution. We have a responsibility both to our own members and to society as a whole in propagating the truth of the gospel. We must expose errors so that they can openly and fairly be engaged by the truth. People outside the church who are in error must be encouraged to examine their position in the light of Scripture. People in error within the church must be patiently instructed from the Scriptures and as a last resort disciplined or have their membership withdrawn if they persist in error.

We should follow the disciplinary process described in Matthew 18:15-20 and 1Corinthians 5:1-13.

(I mention in passing that in this Post-modern age with Emerging Church influences, the previous strategy of refuting error by simply quoting Scripture is likely to be rebuffed by many. There is a new climate of “subjective relativism which may require a different approach to apologetics. Dealing with this more fully is beyond the scope of this book on Baptist Principles.)

7 Separation of church and state

“The principle of SEPARATION BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE in that, in the providence of God, the two differ in their respective natures and functions. The church is not to be identified with the state nor is it, in its faith and practice, to be directed or controlled by the State. The State is responsible for administering justice, ensuring an orderly community, and promoting the welfare of its citizens. The Church is responsible for preaching the Gospel and for demonstrating and making known God’s will and care for all mankind.”

The different nature and functions of the state and the church are fairly clear in the statement above, but we need to look at some further background.

Nature of the state

The Bible does not define the state, and it would include the system of government in the most primitive tribe, to sophisticated democracies today. Although the state is separate to the church, God is in overall control of both, and he has divinely constituted the state as part of his common grace to humankind to ensure order and stability. Any country will only be Christian in so far as individuals (to whom only the term “Christian” can apply) in positions of power implement Christian ideas and policies. Most states will usually be interspersed with Christian and non-Christian ideas and policies.

Christians have certain duties toward the State, as described below.

Government in ancient Israel

Christians sometimes mistakenly liken the country in which they live to Israel in the Old Testament and strive for a Christian country. However, this is misguided. Israel was a once-off unique theocracy under God in terms of the old covenant, but has been replaced by the church under the new covenant in Christ. The church is made up of believers from all nations and represents the fledgling kingdom of God on earth.

Christian duties to the state

The church has a duty to **pray for the state** and those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-4; 1 Timothy 2:3-4)

According to the definitive teaching of Romans 13:1-7, the Church as a body, and individual Christians, must **submit to the State as ordained by God**, irrespective of the type of State, good or bad. Violent rebellion against the State is rebellion against God. There are **limits to obedience** i.e. when the demands of the State conflict with the laws of God (Acts 5:29; Luke 20:25), in which case disobedience is limited to matters of conscience and not in the case of persecution or suffering (1 Peter 4:12-13).

There are also **limits to disobedience**, and active participation in rebellion by force would appear to be ruled out by the basic biblical authority of government. Only when the existing government has clearly been overthrown, should the Church submit to the new one.

Under a democratic system Christians are of course fully entitled to use democratic structures to canvass support for an alternative political party to replace the existing one.

Passive resistance in matters of conscience can be offered, but of course the Church or individual Christians must be willing to pay the penalty in terms of the laws of the country for such resistance.

The Church as a whole should never espouse any political party, as it is made up of individual Christians who all have their preferences according to conscience. The Church may raise its prophetic voice against unjust structures and national scandals that adversely affect the rights on individual citizens, and this has happened in the past in South Africa and continues unabated in response to the corruption in our new democracy.

Individual Christians are entitled to participate in politics, voting for the individual or party of their choice, according to their conscience.

Individual Christians are not prohibited from entering into politics by standing for a political party or as an independent candidate. However, he or she should be motivated by Christian Principles of service, and not for power or prestige. They should also be aware of the potential danger of problems of conscience, when obedience to the ruling party's stance could compromise loyalty to Jesus Christ and to biblical Principles.

This summary of Baptist Principles, with explanations and comments, was compiled by Norman Ronne from BTC Randburg tutorial notes, concepts from Christian Theology by Milard J Erickson, the Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible, and internet resources.

Appendix 1 – Statement of Baptist Principles

PREAMBLE: We as Baptists share many areas of our faith with other members of the professing Christian Church. These include a belief in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; in the supreme Lordship of Jesus Christ as Head of the Church; and in the Bible as the inspired Word of God, and as the final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

There are however areas of principle and practice where we as Baptists make distinctive emphases arising out of our understanding of the Scriptures. It is to clarify these that the following statement is made. We, as Baptists, believe in:

1. The **DIRECT LORDSHIP OF CHRIST** over every believer and over the local church. By this we understand that Christ exercises His authority over the believer and the local Church directly, without delegating it to another.
2. The **CHURCH** as the whole company of those who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. The local church, being a manifestation of the universal church, is a community of believers in a particular place where the Word of God is preached and observed. It is fully autonomous and remains so notwithstanding responsibilities it may accept by voluntary association.
3. **BELIEVERS' BAPTISM** as an act of obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ and a sign of personal repentance, faith and regeneration; it consists of the immersion in water into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

4. The principle of CONGREGATIONALISM, namely, that each member has the privilege and responsibility to use his/her gifts and abilities to participate fully in the life of the church. We recognize that God gifts His church with Pastors/Elders who primarily lead in a spirit of servanthood, equip and provide spiritual oversight, and with Deacons who primarily facilitate the smooth running of the church. This principle further recognizes that each member should participate in the appointment of the church's leaders, and that a constituted church meeting, subject to the direct Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture, is the highest court of authority for the local church.
5. The PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS, by which we understand that each Christian has direct access to God through Christ our High Priest, and shares with Him in His work of reconciliation. This involves intercession, worship, faithful service and bearing witness to Jesus Christ, even to the end of the earth.
6. The principle of RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, namely that no individual should be coerced either by the State or by any secular, ecclesiastical or religious group in matters of faith. The right of private conscience is to be respected. For each believer this means the right to interpret the Scriptures responsibly and to act in the light of his conscience.
7. The principle of SEPARATION BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE in that, in the providence of God, the two differ in their respective natures and functions. The church is not to be identified with the state nor is it, in its faith and practice, to be directed or controlled by the State. The State is responsible for administering justice, ensuring an orderly community, and promoting

the welfare of its citizens. The Church is responsible for preaching the Gospel and for demonstrating and making known God's will and care for all mankind.

Appendix 2 - A Statement of Belief

(Passed at the Baptist Union Assembly at Durban in September 1924)

1. We believe in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in their original writing as fully inspired of God and accept them as the supreme and final authority for faith and life.
2. We believe in one God, eternally existing in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
3. We believe that Jesus Christ was begotten by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, and is true God and true man.
4. We believe that God created man in His own image; that man sinned and thereby incurred the penalty of death, physical and spiritual; that all human beings inherit a sinful nature which issues (in the case of those who reach moral responsibility) in actual transgressions involving personal guilt.
5. We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ died for our sins, a substitutionary sacrifice, according to the Scriptures, and that all who believe in Him are justified on the grounds of his shed blood.
6. We believe in the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus, His ascension into heaven, and his present life as our High Priest and Advocate.
7. We believe in the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

8. We believe that all who receive the Lord Jesus Christ by faith are born again of the Holy Spirit and thereby become the children of God.
9. We believe in the resurrection of both the just and the unjust, the eternal blessed-ness of the redeemed and the eternal banishment of those who have rejected the offer of salvation.
10. We believe that the one true church is the whole company of those who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ and regenerated by the Holy Spirit; that the local church on earth should take its character from this conception of the church spiritual, and therefore that the new birth and personal confession of Christ are essentials of church membership.
11. We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ appointed two ordinances—Baptism and the Lord's Supper—to be observed as acts of obedience and as perpetual witnesses to the cardinal facts of the Christian faith; that Baptism is the immersion of the believer in water as a confession of identification with Christ in burial and resurrection, and that the Lord's Supper is the partaking of bread and wine as symbolical of the Saviour's broken body and shed blood, in remembrance of His sacrificial death till He come.