

What Is a Baptist?

A man dies and immediately arrives at the entrance to heaven. There are several people in front of him so he gets in line. The angel in charge addresses the first person and asks, "What's your denomination?" That person replies, "Methodist." Then angel says, "Room 12 but be very quiet as you pass Room 8." The angel asks the next person, "What's your denomination?" That person says, "Presbyterian." The angel says, "Room 14, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8." Now it's this man's turn and the angel asks him, "What's your denomination?" The person says, "Assemblies of God," and the angel says, "Room 21 but be very quiet as you pass Room 8."

The man asks, "Excuse me, but why do we all have to be quiet as we pass Room 8?"

The angel says, "Because Room 8 is the Baptists and they think they're the only ones here." ¹

Like most of you, I did not grow up in a Baptist church. And, like most of you, I chose to become part of this Baptist church because I liked a lot of what I saw here. But what is it that distinguishes a Baptist church from all the other flavors of Protestant Christianity? Well, most of the differences between Christian denominations are more style than substance. So, what's our style? What theological ingredients make up Valley's flavor? I sum it up with four pronouns – He, Me, We, and They. First, here at Valley, it's all about...

I. He and Me: We Believe That Jesus Christ Is the Only Supreme Head of the Church

Our Affirmation #7 recognizes the authority structure in our church. It begins:

We believe in the universal Church, a living spiritual body of which Christ is the head ...

So, who is the head of this church? The senior pastor? No. The elders? No. The rightful head is Jesus Christ. Eph. 5:23 states it boldly...

... Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

Our Affirmation #10 explains what this means for each individual. It carries the title, "Religious Liberty" and it states...

We believe that every human being has direct relations with God, and is responsible to God alone in all matters of faith...

1 Tim. 2:5, 6a says:

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all ...

Do you see what this points to? It points to the total equality of every human being before God. You don't need a professional holy person to represent you before God. Jesus is all you need. He's your mediator. He is the supreme head of the Church. You were created with a "soul liberty" then to do exactly what Hebrew 4 encourages you to do:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God ... Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:14, 16)

So, this means that there is no "group salvation" or "group damnation" with God. Each individual person has freedom to accept or reject friendship with God. It's just Him and me. God the Father made this clear in Ezek. 18:20...

... The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

Do you see that? You can't inherit someone else's sin nor can you steal someone else's righteousness. These verses teach that no one but me is responsible for my relationship (or lack of relationship) with God. Some think that people are saved only by God's choice, that our fate is predetermined, pre-decided by God alone. Others say that their lack of faith is because of how they were victimized as a child, or abused and sinned against as an adult. Is that what God said through Ezekiel? No! Is that what Jesus said in the New Testament? No! In perhaps the best-known verse in all of the Bible, Jesus makes it crystal clear – our salvation happens when God's will and my free will bond together. Listen:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

First, God's will is that everyone be saved. But secondly, He does not save us against our will. The Greek word translated “whoever” is a golden word. It's the word *pas*. It is a pronominal substantival adjective. You say, “Oh, well that explains everything!” Without going into the technicalities of the grammar, that simply means that in this verse God is rolling out the welcome mat for every person. It means no one is predestined to hell. Everyone has “soul liberty.” Dr. David Allen is the Dean of the School of Theology and Professor of Preaching at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. He writes:

The addition of *pas* before the participle [believing] generalizes it to every single person. The best translation is: ‘Anyone who believes.’ The idea is anyone ... anywhere ... anytime.²

And this is not the only “salvation verse” where this word, in this form, appears. Look... 2 Peter 3:9 – **The Lord is ... patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all (*pas*) should reach repentance.**

1 Tim. 2:3-4 ... **God ... desires all (*pas*) people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.**

1 Tim. 4:10 ... **God... is the Savior of all (*pas*) people, especially of those who believe.**

Baptists believe that Jesus is the only Savior and you and I as individuals have complete soul freedom to choose or not choose a relationship with Him. No one can force you into it but neither can anyone prevent you from choosing it. The Devil can't prevent you and God won't prevent you. You have this incredible, marvelous freedom of soul. How will you use it? Jesus offers you real freedom from every form of evil. You can't create this freedom on your own. Only Jesus possesses it. But He offers it to anyone, anywhere, anytime. All you have to do is say, “Yes.” Have you? We'll come back to that, but now, let's move on to the next pronoun which is...

II. We: We Believe That There Isn't One Priest per Church, But Many

In fact, we believe that every member is a priest! This belief is shared by all Protestant churches but I have to say that I think Baptists understand and honor it with the greatest of sincerity. To understand it, we need to look briefly at the Old Testament temple system.

In the Old Testament, God instructed the Israelites to establish a priesthood. These were people set apart to accomplish something special for God. There was one High Priest who directed this work and many serving priests. What were the responsibilities of the serving priests? They led the worship experiences which means they were the epitome of “essential workers.” They made it possible for individuals to know God's Word and to offer sacrifices so

their sins could be forgiven and they could be accepted by God. In essence, the Jewish priests represented God to the people and they represented the people to God. They were mediators appointed to this responsibility by God. Before they could begin their duties, they were all anointed with oil symbolic of the Holy Spirit, to consecrate them to their priestly positions.

When Jesus came into the world, what's the first thing He did before beginning His ministry? He was baptized, and during the baptism, He was anointed, not symbolically with oil but by the real Holy Spirit Himself. As we studied Jesus this past February, we saw that part of His mission was to become the final High Priest for all humanity. He didn't just offer sacrifices for sin, He BECAME the only LEGITIMATE sacrifice for sin. None of the animal sacrifices ever caused sin to be forgiven. They all just pointed forward to the necessity for a perfect sacrifice one day, a sinless sacrifice to occur so that sin could be forgiven. Heb. 9 explains it:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. (Heb. 9:11-12)

So, Jesus dissolved the old Jewish priesthood and replaced it with Himself as High Priest. And who are His serving priests? Is that the paid clergy today? Well, what does the High Priest say? To be a priest in the Old Testament, you had to be in the family, you had to be in the bloodline of Aaron. But Jesus said this about who was in His priestly bloodline:

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matt. 12:46-50)

So, if you are an obedient follower of Jesus Christ, you are in the bloodline of the High Priest of all Creation, Jesus Christ. And that is why the apostle Peter says ... (1 Peter 2:9-10)

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

As Baptists, we believe then in the "priesthood of all believers." Which means that though we have different gifts and abilities, and there is a structure of organization with differing levels of authority in our church, just like the apostles established in the 1st century church, still we're all on the same mission. Under our eternal High Priest, Jesus the Anointed, we represent a loving God to people and people to a loving God. So, if you are a Christian, you are a priest, because to be a Christian means that you have been anointed, consecrated just like Jesus, by the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ ... (Rom. 8:16-17)

This is the only priesthood described in the New Testament. We're it!

But this priesthood of all believers also has a corporate meaning. The second part of Affirmation #10 says this...

... each Church is independent and must be free from interference by anyone.

This means that, though we are part of a larger group of churches called Converge, our cooperation with those other churches is voluntary. This protects us from the desperate situation

in which many churches in more hierarchical denominations find themselves. Do you know any sincere Christians who attend another church where their denomination had an annual meeting and the outcome was that the delegates voted to approve some new doctrinal position that embraces a lifestyle that is condemned as sin in Scripture? And then, because of the structure of that denomination, it meant that your friends' local church must now embrace that new doctrine. That won't ever happen in Converge! We believe that God's Word gives individuals AND churches both liberty and responsibility through a direct relationship with God through Jesus.

And to fulfill our priestly role and responsibility, this brings us to our final pronoun...

III. They: We Believe That, Like Jesus, We're Here for Them

Paul Evan was the senior pastor of this church before I was. I was an associate pastor here when Paul came. He was here only three-and-a-half years when he was diagnosed with cancer from which he never physically recovered. I remember that when Paul first came, we, as a church, re-evaluated how we communicated what our mission was as a church. So, the elders took a weekend to discuss the possibility of creating a church motto. You know, a short sentence or phrase that encapsulated our mission. All kinds of catchy phrases were being thrown on the table, but I'll never forget Pastor Paul's contribution. He wanted our church motto to be one word, "others." The elders thought that was very motivating but maybe some mention of God should be in there too, so we ended up with the phrase, "We are here for God and others." This stood as our motto for quite some time.

What's your life motto? Jesus gave us His in John 10:10. He said...

"... I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10b)

In the literal Greek, Jesus actually used the pronoun 'they' twice.

I came that they may have life and they may have it more abundantly.

As you read through the Gospels, you see this fixation by Jesus on "others." In Matt. 9 it says that Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages teaching and healing. Then it says...

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion (tenderness) for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matt. 9:36)

Jesus' reason for coming here was not for what He would get out of it. He came for us, for what we would get out of it. We are the "they" of Jesus. Who's the "they" in your life?

Now, listen to me carefully. I'm NOT laying a huge guilt trip on you. Guilt is a very strong but very bad motivator. If you're motivated by guilt to help people, it will not turn out well. And notice this: In Matt. 9, right after it describes Jesus' compassion for these helpless people, He turns and says something to His disciples. What does He say? Does He say:

"What's wrong with you guys? Can't you see how distraught these people are? Get out there and help somebody!!!"

No, He doesn't say that at all. Listen to what He says...

... "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Matt.9:37-38)

Jesus doesn't want angry, guilt-ridden harvesters. They'll just make things worse. He wants harvesters who have a love of crop, a tenderness with the fruit, so that none is even bruised in the harvesting process.

If you don't have a heart right now for "them," don't try to harvest "them." Just pray. Pray earnestly that God will tenderize your heart and give you a heart of compassion for "them." And while He's tenderizing you, ask Him to send someone to "them" whose heart is already like His.

So, what's a Baptist? A Baptist is a four-pronoun follower of Jesus. It's one who knows that the church should be about He, Me, We and They. What flavor is that? That's Jesus flavor. Let's pray...

Remember I asked earlier if you'd ever said, "Yes" to Jesus? Well, now's your time to do that. He's rolled out the welcome mat to you, that God the Father loves you and showed that love by sending His Son Jesus into the world to make the only sacrifice that could pay the debt of your sin. Today, you could be forgiven and become a member of God's forgiven family by just saying, "Yes, Jesus, I need that. I believe You are the Lord. I believe that God raised You from the dead paying for my sins. Yes, I want to be part of Your family." Right where you are, say that to Jesus and instantly you're a priest.

Amen

¹ www.ethics.daily.com/the-jokes-on-them-denominations-in-heaven-cms-16832

² Dr. David Allen, *Whosoever Will* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), p. 24