

Baptist History and Polity Guided Self-Study

Mission Northwest

Introduction

In an age when “denominationalism” seems to be on the wane – dead in some people’s minds, movements of the Spirit are not. Essentially the history of Baptists is the history of a movement of God’s spirit in the lives, minds and hearts of people, one that called them back to Biblical principles and life together in communities of mutual support, accountability and encouragement. Baptists have, for better or worse, developed denominations in attempts to organize their ministries together. However, it is important to remember and recapture that Baptists were first a movement of people seeking to worship and follow Christ revealed in the Bible and to offer that to others. At their best, Baptists continue to seek to be this. Therefore, this study’s aim is not merely to meet requirements for ordination, as significant as those are, but also to look at what has made Baptists who we are, to examine the lives and hearts of people in whose wake we do ministry, and to renew and recapture the essence of our call and witness to the lost and broken world in which we live.

By the same token, this study’s purpose is not promote “denomination.” Rather it seeks to help people get in touch with the roots of this movement that gave birth to what today we still highly prize: religious liberty (whether is religious or not); the Scripture with its revelation of the Way, Truth and Life who leads to a better, fuller life now and in the hereafter; a mutual regard for one another that not only gives rise to humble leadership but also enlightened followership. In addition, this study is meant to help people understand what the Baptist heritage has meant and does mean for today. The Baptist heritage is not pride of place but in passion for mission; it is not a condescending attitude that other Christian expressions are erroneous and misleading, but it is highlighting facets of the diamond of Truth we have come to see. In this study, we want to again define the home we have with each other around these common ideas and understandings of what draws us more closely together.

Purpose

With the above in mind, the purpose of this course is then

- To provide a guided self-study in Baptist History and Polity to meet the requirements either for either the ordination process or the recognition of (a previous) ordination process
- To provide understanding about how Baptist churches came into existence and how they tend to approach the life of the church and what it means for a group of people to “be a church”
- To highlight the contributions of Baptists to present day Christian life, understanding and Kingdom work
- To encourage anyone who would like a better understanding of Baptists and “baptistic” churches, those who do not have a particular Baptist heritage but nevertheless have values and teachings that are clearly reflected in Baptist theology and teachings about Christ, the church and missions.
- To highlight and revitalize the unique understanding Baptists have of the Body of Christ as a people of mission; it is not intended to promote Baptists as a denominational or organizational principle for the for the sake of an institution.

Form of This Study

There are two books designated for this course of study:

- McBeth, H. Leon. The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1987.
 - **Read chapters 1-8, 10, 11, 14 and 16**
- Stewart, Howard R. American Baptists and the Church. University Press of America. 1997.
 - **Read the entire book**

In addition to questions about the content, there are “Questions for Reflection and Application” which are designed to spark your interaction with the material and your personal views about how Baptist thought and “principles” (values) can or should interact with the culture and environment in which we find ourselves today.

Instructions

What follows is a set of questions for reflection based on the reading listed above. You are asked to do the following:

1. Read the material for this course as listed above.
2. Indicate by your signature on the statement, provided at the end of this document, stating that you have read the material assigned.
3. For **The Baptist Heritage**: respond *in writing to all the questions for each chapter*. For **American Baptists and the Church**, please answer all the questions.
 - a. Each response should be about a paragraph long. The total length of the entire set of responses should be 12-14 pages.
 - b. Though no answer is necessarily incorrect, evidence of your thoughtful consideration of the material is the desired and necessary outcome.
4. When you have completed the responses, return them along with the signed statement indicating you have read the material to

Patti Duckworth, Associate Executive Minister, Mission Northwest
p-duckworth@abcnw.org

Returning these via email is preferred. If you wish to return paper copies, please send them to me at 601 S. Ross Point Rd. Post Falls, ID 83854

Questions? Please contact Patti Duckworth at p-duckworth@abcnw.org or 406-788-4350

The Baptist Heritage by H Leon McBeth

Questions for Reflection and Application

Chapter 1 –Baptist Beginnings

1. What similarities do you see between the social and political circumstances in which Baptists emerged and present circumstances? Differences?
2. If the Bible is such an essential and necessary part of Baptist identity and history, how can / does that impact the church today?

Chapter 2 – Defining the Faith

3. Formative Influences

Considering the ways confessions were originally used, are there any ways that confessions might be used by congregations and leaders today?

4. DOCTRINAL BELIEFS: Religious Liberty

How do you think our basic belief of religious liberty can be helpful in addressing post-modernism, secularism and the growing impact of Islam (or any other non-Christian religion) in the US?

5. DOCTRINAL BELIEFS: Religious Liberty

Is it appropriate for Baptists, who believe in religious liberty, to actively work for political parties, groups, campaigns or causes? Why or why not? How is this to be done?

6. **DOCTRINAL BELIEFS: Religious Liberty**

Given these historic Baptist understandings of religious liberty, how would you deal with someone within your congregation who wanted the church to become engaged in a political cause or government issue?

7. **DOCTRINAL BELIEFS: Eschatology**

What are the difficulties of making practical the theology of a future hope or eschatology?

8. **DOCTRINAL BELIEFS: Identity and Expression of Faith**

What might we learn from the difficulties Baptists had in forming their identity and expressing their faith?

9. **DOCTRINAL BELIEFS: Worship**

What insights from these brief descriptions of early Baptist worship have you found helpful in your own thinking about worship in your own church?

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| Chapter 3 – Defending the Faith |
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10. Is the struggle for religious freedom for which Baptists advocated from the beginning a thing of the past? Why or why not?

11. After having read about these earliest Baptist leaders (1640-1660), what can you point to in their lives and work as an example for us today in our work to spread the Gospel through the ministry of our churches? (Pages 99-113)
12. What can we learn from this period (pages 113-121) about how Baptists understood the relationship between pastor and congregation? What are the implications for today?
13. What are some values and beliefs which Baptists have early championed that you feel could be highlighted appropriately within the context of your ministry?
14. What aspects of Baptist life have you come to appreciate as a result of reading this chapter?

Chapter 4 – Baptist Beginnings in America

15. Of the brief stories of the leaders or congregations given in this chapter, which do you find most compelling or helpful? Why?

16. Given the importance of religious liberty for Baptists in early America, how important do you think it is that Baptists be vigilant for everyone's religious liberty? Why? Should religious liberty be for everyone one? Why or why not?
17. What is one aspect of the life of Roger Williams that you find the most compelling or intriguing? Why?
18. Pages 148 – 150 gives a summary of what marked Baptist life in general in this early period in America, speaking of it as independent from English Baptists and diverse; they had persistent problems and their congregations were usually small, led by bivocational pastors if they had one, and had informal worship in which the Bible was central. With all this and more against them, why do you think they not only survived but even flourished in the years ahead?

Chapter 5 – General Baptists in England

19. Read the first full paragraph of page 158, which begins “Henceforth, General Baptists squandered their energies on trifles.” Are there any lessons to be applied to work and ministry within your church today? What might be some of the “trifles” that you or your congregation faces that would cause “evangelism to languish” and lead to having to gospel to preach? What is one thing you might do to address being distracted by these things? In what ways do you determine the difference between the important and unimportant?
20. From what you now know of Dan Taylor, what things do you admire or think he did well? Do you think there is a place for that kind of long-term leadership in our churches today? Why or why not?

21. Do you feel that division that leads to separate groups is helpful or necessary among churches? Among groups of churches (denominations or associations)? Why or why not?

Chapter 6 – Particular Baptists in England

22. Does your current church have any tendencies to Calvinism or hyper-Calvinism? If so, how do they affect the inner life of the church and its outreach? (Please be aware that it would not be correct to assume that Calvinism or leanings to Calvinism necessarily result in a lack of concern for the lost.)

23. What excesses or what deficiencies need to be overcome in our time in order that we might experience revival among American Baptists? Are there any clues in the discussion about Particular Baptists?

24. Given the somewhat tragic events that surrounded Carey's ministry, would you say there is too high a price to be paid for ministry? What price should be expected from family members of one called to ministry?

25. What similarities do you see between the culture of the 1700s in England and the US today with regard to religion, specifically the Baptist expression of Christian faith? What key things do we need to do to engage or respond to this culture?

26. What is your current conviction regarding “closed” and “open” communion? Do your definitions of these differ from the more original ones, as stated above? What is the practice of the church you are currently a member of? Do you believe the congregation on the whole understands these values and beliefs? For example, before participation in communion, what instruction or invitation is given to the congregation?

Chapter 7 – Revival Fires: Baptists in America

27. McBeth (the author) quotes Walter Shurden’s characterization of the two groups as the difference between ORDER and ARDOR (p. 234). Which of these two general traditions or characterizations are you the most comfortable with? If you would combine the two, how would you do it and why?

28. Could or should Baptists today recover any of the reasons given to join in associations? What suggestions or recommendations do you make to your local church? (pp. 239-242)

Chapter 8 – Baptists in Colonial America: The Struggle for Religious Liberty

29. Given this basic definition and history of religious liberty given on pages 252-253, are there limits to religious liberty? If so, what might those be?

30. What do you think are the practical applications of the principle of religious liberty in today's culture and in your ministry? How does this affect your approach to evangelism and outreach?
31. How might Leland's arguments apply to issues of prayer in public education settings, Muslim Sharia law (both in places where Islam is not the primary religion and places where it is), and actions that are said to be religiously motivated?
32. After reading about what Baptists endured for the sake of religious freedom, do you feel you would be willing to do the same? Would you be willing to do the same even for those who do not believe as you do?
33. Is there any time in which the government should step in regarding matters of religious practice and faith? Why?
34. What do you think is the difference between religious liberty and soul freedom? At what point can or should a congregation limit either one?

Chapter 10 – United for Missions: Baptists in American, 1800-1845

35. Pages 343-344 point out that Baptists have not been able to achieve theological consensus. In general, is this lack of clear theological unity a strength or a weakness for Baptists? Why?

36. From your understanding to date, do you think it is possible for Baptists to have “theological consensus”? Why or why not? Is it something we could work for? Why or why not?
37. After reading the synopsis of Luther Rice’s life and work on pages 359-360, what personal insights might you take away or find applicable to your own life and ministry?
38. In light of the fact that the Christian faith is growing most quickly in Asia, Africa and South America, is “North America for Christ” still a goal to be embraced? Why or why not? Do you see an ongoing need for home mission work? In what ways?
39. Do you believe there are any “anti-mission” sentiments in the background of your congregation? How are they expressed? Are they connected to the congregation’s history or to the background that you or your attenders have, or are anti-mission attitudes grounded in something else? What are the implications of this for the vitality of your congregation?
40. What kind of response can or do you give to any of these above objections to missions?

41. In what ways do you think the authority of Scripture can be upheld without falling into the problem of relying solely on “head knowledge” and an extreme literalness of Scripture reading for the practice of faith?
42. How do you understand this division over slavery in light of the New Testament teaching in Ephesians 4: 1-3 in which we are told to “make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit”?

Chapter 11 – Going Separate Ways: Baptists in America, 1845 – 1900

43. How do you think a balance between local mission effort and the broader work can be achieved? What does that look like in the everyday life of the local congregation and local leaders?
44. Do you think there any of the early difficulties faces by the HMS still present today? Or, how do you see the issues of the past present today?
45. How do you see the tension regarding education, especially education for pastors, being played out in your current situation? Is there a value on education? Why or why not? What is the value of an “educated clergy?”

46. Landmarkism emphasizes the local church to the exclusion of any kind of connection with other churches. Do you think there is anything of the truth in this understanding of the church?

Chapter 14 – Northern Baptists

47. Northern (American) Baptists have cooperated in ecumenical ways for many years. What is your belief about working with other churches? How and when should a congregation engage in such cooperation?

48. The fundamentalist controversy within the Northern Baptist Convention finally led to two groups that withdrew from the main body: the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC) and the Conservative Baptists of America (CBA). Do you believe the way each group went about addressing these concerns was justified? Why or why not?

49. Restructuring the denomination has been one way to try to address the concerns of pastors and churches in how to do mission together. Yet one critique of the efforts is the result has been the local church and local pastor are minimally engaged in the larger work of the denomination or ignore it altogether. Is this a problem in your setting? If so, how do you think it is best addressed?

50. Pages 596-600 give a brief summary of some of the theological developments of the early to mid-20th century. Which of these do you find the most significant and why?
51. McBeth said Robert Campbell, a former ABC/USA general secretary, as saying American Baptists (in 1984) were looking for their identity. McBeth quotes Campbell as saying, “Most American Baptists think our primary identity is pluralism. That’s a lousy identity.” Campbell felt that a better identity “would be to view the ABC as evangelical, ecumenical, interracial, and international” (McBeth, p. 608). Given what you have learned from this study and your experience in an American Baptist church, do you agree? Why? If not, what do you think is a better identity?

Chapter 16 – The Larger Baptist Family

52. Chapter 16 gives a brief summary of a number of smaller Baptist groups in America. Select two different groups and briefly state what you agree with and disagree with in their understanding of being “Baptist.”

American Baptists and the Church by Howard Stewart

Questions for Reflection and Application

1. Are any of Stewart's descriptions of what is lacking in American Baptist churches true of your congregation? If so, please name 1 or 2 things and what you think could be done to change this.
2. Does your church have a confession? Has it ever had one? Is it currently used in any way? If not, why not? If not, what things might be included in one that would enhance the life and witness of the congregation?
3. One of the major themes of Stewart's writing is the importance of the associational principle of Baptist life. How does your current congregation practice this principle? What would you like to do to see this improved or enhanced?
4. After reading Stewart's presentation on the associational principle, what do you consider the strongest 2 reasons for pursuing this principle? Why?

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 - entire book

In addition, I verify I have completed the reading indicated above on [Click here to enter a date.](#) *

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[Click here to enter a date.](#)

Signature

Date

* Note: this form must be returned with the answers to the “Questions for Reflection” in order to receive credit for having completed this guided self-study.

RETURN (electronically or physically) to:

Patti Duckworth, Associate Executive Minister, Mission Northwest
p-duckworth@abcnw.org OR 601 S. Ross Point Rd. Post Falls, ID 83854