

Eight Deep Roots

Postmodern Implications for Baptist Distinctives

By Faye Reynolds

Introduction

Denominationalism is a relatively new concept in the history of the church. Before the reformation, the Christian Church was fairly homogeneous with a greatly defined hierarchy of order and power. The head of the Church resided in Rome, its roots stemming from the Apostle Peter's first church after the resurrection of Christ. All authority was to be traced back to Peter.

Wherever you have power structures, you have corruption and the church is no exception. Martin Luther was one of the brave men who dared to challenge the authority of the Church and its practices. It was his desire that the Christian Church return to the Biblical teachings that it had strayed from and "reform" its ways. He had no intention of starting a new Christian church, but resistance to his message forced those 'protest'ing the church to form a new fellowship of believers, identified under the banner of the Protestant Church.

The question of power and authority continues to be a struggle. Who or what is the final authority? How much structure is needed for order and control? How does accountability take place within the Christian body and also allow freedom to respond to the work of the Holy Spirit. The wresting of these issues creates more and more division within present day denominations.

A very brief Church History

16th Century Europe
DOMINANT ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH



The Protestant Reformation



Luther Lutheran	Calvin & Zwingley Reformed	Menno Simons Anabaptist
Pessimistic view of society. All born depraved and saved only by the grace of God through the sacraments	Optimistic view of those predestined within society. Only the elected saved and members of true church	Pessimistic view of society – all ruled by the flesh. Only those responding to grace with the heart are saved.
Law and order to be kept by the church	Church to aid society in law and order	Law and order kept by the state.
Christians should not withdraw from society but aid in doing good.	Look to leadership of the elect within Society	Christians should withdraw and maintain purity through segregation.
The Kingdom of God cannot be established on earth	The Kingdom of God is found only in the Elect	Kingdom is found in heart-felt believers on earth
Pessimistic view of church and humanity– by faith through grace alone	Optimistic view of the church because of their predestined origin	Optimistic view of the church by faith through repentance

England: “The Middle Way”
The Catholic and Protestant Compromise



The Anglican Church

- “Act of Supremacy” – the King is the Supreme Head of the Church
- “Act of Uniformity” – use of Common Book of Prayer for all services



English Separatists



Puritans Congregationalist Quakers Baptists Methodist

John Smyth founded the first Separatist Congregation

- By reading Scripture he became convinced that Baptism is a confession of faith, not a rite of the church for membership.
- He meets some Mennonites and incorporates some of their Anabaptist teachings.
- He baptizes himself because of his rejection of Church authority and founds the first Baptist church in Holland.

Thomas Helwys

- Is baptized by John Smyth and returns to England and becomes the founder of the General Baptists in England.

Anabaptist Roots: “The Re-Baptizers”

- Church is made up regenerate believers or those “born again”. Must experience a heart-felt response to the work of the Spirit. Church is not made up of a general population.
- Christianizing the world is not to be expected. The world will always be ruled by the flesh.
- Believers must maintain purity and preserve its example by segregation. Proof of your faith is found in your fruits. It was said of Anabaptists: “Their lives were excellent”.
- The true church will always suffer persecution – it will be reviled and rejected by those ruled by the flesh.
- Conversion of a king or ruler does not Christianize a state.
- Pessimistic about the future of the world but optimistic about the regenerate church.
- Baptism was a symbol of regeneration – of dying to the flesh and rising to new life in Christ. Baptism was NOT a sign of membership into a Christian society.
- Church is kept pure by discipline and expulsion of those whose lives do not exemplify the pattern of Christ’s conduct.
- No State intervention – liberty for all believers.
- Not to swear oath of allegiance to the State, for the world is without hope. Only allegiance is to Christ. “Take no oath, swear not at all”.
- Not bound to defend the wars of the State. Generally repudiated war and capital punishment. Pacifism becomes the primary practice.
- Every member is a missionary and all men and women are evangelical tools.
- No creeds or pledges to agree to one formula of faith.

From these roots, comes the development of 8 distinctive Baptist Beliefs. They can be summarized into three categories: Freedom of the Individual, Freedom of the Congregation, and Freedom of Religion.

1. Liberty of the individual

Each believer has the right and responsibility to read and interpret scripture as led by the Holy Spirit. Each believer is a priest and minister of Christ. They need no mediator other than Christ to live in relationship with God. There is no creed other than scripture itself. No authority may dictate the 'correct' interpretation.

2. Liberty of the congregation

Each congregation is autonomous and free. The highest authority, under God, is the gathering of believers within a congregation. Congregations are free to develop their own by-laws, covenants, and statements of faith. Congregations are free to allow into membership any whom the membership deems fit. Congregations are free to call any as pastor whom the membership believes to be called. Each congregation is free to associate with other congregations. Baptist congregations have historically associated with other congregations for the tasks of evangelism, mission, education, and good works.

3. Liberty of religion

Freedom of religion, freedom for religion, and freedom from religion: Baptists rejected the state-religion union that was common in Europe during the reformation period and advocated for religious freedom. Baptist pastors (especially John Leland and Isaac Backus) were strong advocates for the disestablishment of religion in the second half of the 18th century. John Leland was a close friend with James Madison and Thomas Jefferson and helped establish the language of the First Amendment, guaranteeing freedom of religion in the fledgling United States. *We believe each person must have the freedom to choose for her or himself whether to live with faith and by which faith to live.* Baptists practice believer's baptism for two basic reasons: (1) because we believe scripture teaches it and (2) because we believe each person must choose for her or himself whether to appropriate the faith of the community.

Another Way to look at the Eight Distinctives is as an Acrostic:

- *B is for Bible, our only reliable authority.*
- *A is for Autonomy, the independence of the local church.*
- *P is for Priesthood, the position of all believers.*
- *T is for Two Ordinances, Baptism & Lord's Supper.*
- *I is for Individual Soul Liberty.*
- *S is for Saved & Baptized Church Membership.*
- *T is for Two Officers, Pastor and Deacons.*
- *S is for Separation of Church and State.*

We will now study the eight Baptist roots in an order that builds upon each premise.

Lesson 1: The Centrality of Scripture

This is the search for Truth. How does a Christian discern what is of God and what is not? What is the guiding authority in our lives and who can we trust? For Baptists, no human authority can ever fully be trusted. There is, however a trustworthy source to which human behavior can be held accountable. It is the Holy Spirit that interprets Scripture to the believer and it is the unchanging Word that is tangibly before us and ultimately trustworthy.

Corollary Beliefs:

- No Creeds or Doctrinal statements. All creeds are written by man and therefore fallible and untrustworthy.
- No Interpretive Authority. The Holy Spirit will reveal the meaning of Scripture to the believer. There is no need for an interpreter to stand between Scripture and the believer.
- No Tradition, writing or practice can equal the authority of Scripture.

Read II Timothy 3: 16

1. What does this verse mean to you and your understanding of the Bible?
2. In which areas does the Bible claim authority and inspiration?
3. Is the Bible an authority in the areas of Science? History? Other?

Read II Peter 3: 14 – 18

1. How does Peter view the writings and letters of the Apostle Paul?
2. What are some of the dangers of interpreting Scripture if left solely to the individual?

Read Matt. 22: 23 – 33

1. What does Jesus say about the authority of Scripture and its use?
2. How does Jesus use the Scriptural text for teaching a doctrine?

Read John 5: 37- 40

1. What is Jesus warning us about with regards to our use of Scripture? What is the danger of knowledge without heart?

Other Scriptures to reference and discuss as time allows: Matt. 26: 52 – 56, Romans 15:4, Luke 24: 27, 32, Acts 17:11, 18: 24-25

There are many buzz words around the authority of Scripture that are often used to divide believers rather than unite them. It would be unwise to get caught up in a discussion of the Bible as “inerrant”, “infallible”, “literal”, “verbal or plenary inspiration”. Rather, there are some key elements to focus on in this discussion.

1. Scripture is the primary vehicle through which the Holy Spirit communicates to people of faith.

2. Baptists are 'people of the book' and want the Scripture to be in the hands of the people. Some denominations believe that the Bible is a 'complicated book' and needs to be interpreted to the average citizen.
3. Revelation is not a static thing but growing as the Spirit reveals new truths to the people of God. eg: slavery. As well, each reading of a text can bring new insights – the Spirit highlights different things at different times.
4. Old Testament Scriptures should always be read in light of the New Testament revelations through Christ's teachings.
5. Though the individual is free to interpret Scripture, it is wise to be accountable to the body of believers and study Scripture with other believers so that the Holy Spirit's revelations can be confirmed with the body. It is important to have accountability to a believing community but the conscience of the individual must be respected as a window to the Holy Spirit and may call them to act apart from community.

Disciplines which come out of this Baptist Distinctive

1. Personal Bible study and devotional reading: Regular, consistent reading and studying of the Bible gives more opportunity for the Holy Spirit to speak and convict the heart. A Baptist's Bible should be well worn!
2. Small Group Study: Healthy Baptist Churches have small group ministries which study the Scriptures together to encourage one another in faith and provide a place for discussion, growing understanding and accountability to individual interpretation.
3. Biblically based sermons: The pastor's authority rests in his/her discipline to stay true to the Scriptures and preach from that basis. Those listening should always discern for themselves whether they agree with the Scriptural interpretation given in light of their own study. (See Acts 17:11)
4. Scripture is to be taken as a whole and in context with the message of Jesus, the message of grace. Isolated verses should be read in light of the whole truth revealed.

Reflections

It is worth noting in some denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, great emphasis is placed upon inerrancy of the Scripture and its authority, yet they have moved away from trusting their people to correctly interpret Scripture. Some leaders want the Scripture to be interpreted their way. Some emphasize the King James Version in the same way the Catholic Church once insisted on the Latin language. It removes understanding from the people, and places it in the hands of a human authority to interpret truth to the people. In other words, they do not trust the "common people" to understand God's Word for themselves. This is ultimately an issue of control as it is very hard to control what the Holy Spirit might lead the people to do!

Lesson 2: The Freedom of the Individual

Freedom in Christ is a primary teaching of the Apostle Paul and a foundational belief for Baptists. Every individual must be free to live according to his/her conscience and must not be persuaded otherwise. This is rooted in the understanding that the Spirit of Christ indwells the one who receives Him, and therefore becomes the inner guide and conscience of the believer.

Corollary Beliefs:

- No one is saved by their family roots, their nationality or their church affiliations. It is realized through personal response to the call of the Spirit.
- Each individual is responsible for their own spiritual journey through personal spiritual disciplines.
- No one should be coerced or emotionally manipulated into receiving the gospel or hurried before the Spirit's timing.

Read Galatians 1: 6 – 10

1. Who does Paul consider responsible for discerning what is the true gospel and what is false?
2. What are the criteria for this discernment?
3. Where does Paul's confidence come from regarding the gospel that he received?

Read Galatians 2: 3 – 5

1. Some Jewish factions tried to add on conditions to salvation such as circumcision. How did Paul react to this addition to the gospel?
2. What might be some practices that get placed upon the believer today that violate the individual's spiritual freedom in Christ?

Continue with Galatians 2: 14 - 16

1. Paul sees that actions must come from convictions of the heart, not for pressure from the outside to conform. In what ways might we be anxious for a believer to follow certain practices before their heart is ready to adopt them?
2. How does our heritage affirm the teachings of Paul regarding an individual's spiritual journey?

Read Romans 14: 11 - 13

1. How is each accountable for personal salvation and what is the believer's responsibility to one another?

Quote from *Catch the Wind* by Charles Ringma. Pg 73

People come to faith in Christ in a variety of ways and their development is most helpful when they can move at their own pace. The church should therefore create an open environment for people to do their searching, ask their questions, experience the life of Christians and so come to an intelligent commitment rather than a forced one.

1. In what ways may some churches stray from the tenet of belief that the individual is free to respond to their own conscious and the leading of the spirit?
2. How does this issue affect our understanding of authority and leadership in the church? What is a leader responsible for and what is **not** their mandate or responsibility?
3. How open is your church community to people who have doubts and questions and struggle with their beliefs? How receptive are they to people who have explored other faith traditions? Could the church do better in this regard?

Post-modern Implications:

This Baptist distinctive regards the value of the individual and the freedom this instills has great potential for reaching out to the post-modern community around us. People want to be exposed to all kinds of faiths and religious experiences so that they can decide for themselves what truth is. They don't want to take it from only one source or simply believe what their parents believe. The parental challenge is how to teach our children so that they will come to Jesus through their own conviction and response; to teach **how** to think, not just **what** to think.

As a church, we ought not to be threatened when individuals seek truth through unconventional avenues. We have to trust that those who truly seek Him will find Him. Our task is to be a safe and welcoming place for the exploration to take place. Our duty is to be a true reflection of the community of God, one that is not petty and divisive, but loving, caring and open to receive all of humanity, no matter what their cultural background or belief system. From there, it is the work of the Spirit within the individual's soul that will reveal the true God and prepare the heart for acceptance.

The church must not get into the trap of defending their doctrines or defending God or their beliefs about God. Truth is not fragile. It can handle all of the doubts and questions that can be thrown at it. Science is not the enemy because it is a discipline of asking questions and seeking answers. Making room for individuals to ask questions is a wonderful role that the church can play in God's kingdom. Reggie McNeil made a statement at the Banff Pastor's Conference in Nov. 2004 that "*The voice of God is more often heard in our questions than in our answers.*"

Lesson 3: Church membership is for Apprentices of Jesus

Going back through the history of the church, in the era following Constantine, Christianity became equated with a nationality, not a faith. The world was decreed to be “Christian”. Infants were baptized into the church and there was little choice in the manner. One was not welcomed into the church by a personal decision, but assumed to be within the church unless disciplined and removed.

After the reformation, believers differed on the place of the church and its membership. Calvin believed in pre-destination or election, which meant that God pre-chose who was saved and who was not, and therefore it was the role of the church to discern who was in and who wasn't. Luther believed that no one was good enough to be part of the church, that all required God's grace and God bestowed that grace upon all. The liturgy and sacraments become important vehicles of the church in receiving that grace and so participating in the sacraments ensured salvation.

The Anabaptist tradition believed in “regenerate church membership” – which meant that a person had to be re-born, that each individual had to experience a spiritual birth and then give witness to that new life. Salvation came to those had a ‘heart felt’ experience with God and committed their lives to obedience. No one was saved by being a member of a church, you were saved by faith, and baptism initiated you into the Christian church.

Read Romans 3: 21 - 26

1. How do you understand salvation taking place from this passage?
2. How does God initiate salvation and make it possible for a sinful world to come to Him?

Read Matthew 9: 1 – 8

1. How does salvation come to this man?
2. How do you think Jesus describes salvation and what does it take to be saved? Also read Matt. 9: 27-29

Read Matthew 10: 37 – 42

1. How does Jesus define a believer?
2. What is important to him in terms of response and action? In other words, what makes a person a member of His kingdom?
3. What might an apprentice of Jesus be like?

Read Acts 2: 38 – 47

1. From this passage, what is the role of the individual in salvation?
2. What is the role of the church community?

3. How does membership into the Christian community take place and what is the blessing of community experience?
4. How do we lose sight of the meaning of membership?

Post Modern Implications

Membership has most often been used to define who is in and who is out, who has privileges and who is denied. People in our society are not joiners. It is important to 'belong' as in feel cared for, but it is not a priority to be part of a club or organization. The church must really wrestle with what church membership means and its value.

The Anabaptists took membership very seriously. The church was the most sacred organism that they knew and membership was a responsibility that should not be conceded or taken lightly. Those that applied for it had to give convincing proof of the faith that was in them and pledge themselves in a solemn covenant to all that the church stood for. The church saw itself as a holy society and did not hesitate to excommunicate one who was not living up to the holy standards of obedience it had set.

The early church of Acts revealed a solid, sacrificial commitment to the community of believers. They truly cared for and shared with one another. It was not a club, it was a living community – it was to be the body of Christ living in the world.

How do we balance the high calling of what we should be as the Spirit born within community and the truth that we are still failing, struggling sinners? If pure obedience is a requirement, could any of us belong? However, if we offer membership with no responsibility to the community, does it become meaningless? The Lord requires an obedient heart – not that we won't fail, but that we will make every effort to succeed. The church should ask nothing less.

To consider the church as a guild of Christ's apprentices might be a language that could offer insight into the purpose of the church. (*When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. Matt 5:1ff. The Message*) Church members are those that join the climb. We gather together to support one another in learning how to claim Jesus as Lord or Master – the life that we are now dedicating ourselves to emulate in compassion and love. All are learners, not one is yet perfect or holy, but encourage one another toward the goal.

There are advantages and disadvantages to having a formal membership in a local church. Some legal requirements to qualify as a charity might need to be adhered – or we can truly strive for separation from the church and the state, which will be discussed in following lessons.

Lesson 4: The Ordinances of Baptist and the Lord's Supper

The term ordinance is a word used to describe the two commands given by Christ relative to the believer's relationship with Jesus Christ. The root of the term ordinance comes from the word "order" or "commandment." An ordinance is a matter of obedience, and does not provide for or contribute to one's salvation experience.

A sacrament (Latin origin for oath of allegiance) is something visible and physical whereby the Spirit becomes present to us. A sacrament is a means of grace, a vehicle or vessel of the Spirit. A division among denominations comes from the definition and understanding of these two terms. Baptists have been adamant that there is only one means of salvation and that is receiving Jesus as Lord of your life. Any other act is a matter of obedience. They define only two ordinances as direct commands from Jesus – to be baptized and to remember Christ's death through the bread and the wine in the context of community.

Catholicism teaches that there is no salvation outside of the church and participation in the sacrament. The Sacraments are the means by which God bestows His grace upon his depraved creation. These seven sacraments are:

- 1) Baptism - usually performed upon infants to bring cleanse from original sin
- 2) Chrismation or confirmation – occurring at the age of accountability to affirm or own one's faith.
- 3) Holy Communion or Eucharist – receiving the body and blood of Christ and renewing the grace received through the death of Christ.
- 4) Confession of sins and penance – performing an act of contrition and repentance.
- 5) Marriage.
- 6) Holy Unction – anointing the sick with oil and performing the last rites before death
- 7) Ordination – the setting apart of those called as priests and servants of the church.

Read Matt 28:19

1. What are the commands of Jesus in this text and is there any evidence that baptism should be deemed an ordinance?
2. How much importance does Jesus place upon his commands?

Read Mark 1:9

1. What did the baptism of John signify and why was Jesus baptized. What does that teach?
2. Is baptism in this case or in any case a means of salvation?
3. What is the significance of the Spirit of God coming upon Jesus at this time?

Read Romans 6: 1 – 14

1. How does this passage affirm the mode of baptism in the form of immersion (totally submersing the body in water).
2. What evidence do we see that baptism should be a personal decision at an age of understanding, rather than a rite of passage or infant dedication?

Read Luke 21: 14 – 23

1. What significance did Jesus bestow upon this final meal with his disciples?
2. What evidence is there that Jesus wanted all of his followers to adopt this practice of remembrance?

Read I Corinthians 10: 14 – 22

1. How seriously did the early Christian church take the celebration of the Lord's Supper?
2. What do you believe was the significance of this act among the believers?

Read Acts 2:41 – 42

1. How did the early church view these two practices and what were their significance to the church?
2. How does obedience to the commands of Christ become significant to the believer without becoming a means of actual salvation?
3. Is there a way to view the two ordinances as an opportunity to experience the love and grace of God, without defining it as a means of salvation? Is there a balance between the two understandings?

Post Modern Implications

1. Baptists are very insistent that the act of baptism is not the means of salvation but rather a description of what the believer has experienced in Christ.
2. Baptists heartily affirm that the church is made of those who have experienced spiritual birth in Christ.

THEREFORE: Should the mode of baptism as immersion be essential for membership into a Baptist church? Is not the heart of the believer more important than the outward sign depicting the believer's journey?

OR: Would a heart truly obedient to Christ refuse to experience the waters of baptism by immersion?

Grace and salvation are not one in the same. "Faith verses works" is a constant struggle in understanding our Christian journey. We are not saved BY our works, but saved TO do the works of God. Obedience is an outward sign of an inward reality – that Christ lives in us. In that sense, all acts of obedience are sacramental and in them grace abounds!

Lesson 5: Priests to one another within the Body of Christ

Within the Jewish religious system, the high priest played a very important role in mediating God's grace to the people. He was the intermediary between God and humanity. He offered the sacrifices on behalf of the people, burned the incense of prayer, entered into God's presence in the Holy of Holies. The Priest had to be pure and follow strict rituals to be worthy of the position.

Jesus took the place of the High Priest in two ways: He became the final sacrifice of forgiveness, and now stands in the presence of the Father and mediates on our behalf. There is no further need for a human mediator nor for continuing sacrifices.

In one way, we have no need for priests, and in another way, we have all become priests who intercede on each other's behalf before the throne of Grace.

Read Hebrews 4:14 – 5:10

1. How does Jesus supersede the abilities and duties of the Jewish priesthood?
2. In what ways was Jesus a priest before his death and resurrection and in what ways does he continue this role?
3. Does Jesus replace fully the need for a human face to pronounce our sins forgiven?

Read Revelations 1: 5b – 6a

1. In this context, what does it mean for the church to be kingdom and its members to be priests?

Read I Peter 2: 5 – 10

1. What are spiritual sacrifices that we are to continue to offer up to God?
2. What role do we serve if we are truly priest to one another – a “holy priesthood?”
3. Is there any need for a practice of confession and repentance within the church? Is it possible to fulfill the role of priest to one another in this capacity?

Continue reading I Peter 2: 13 – 17

1. Does this passage give us any insight into the role of authority and our response to it? Is the authority structure here referring to the world, or to the church?

2. How does verse 17 give us direction into how we should view the church and those within it? Is there any sense of hierarchy, or that one should be treated differently from another within the Body of Christ.
3. Do vs. 18 – 21 justify the owning and beating of slaves in light of the previous text – that we are all priests, and all a people belonging to God?
4. Does chapter 3 justify the secondary role of women in light of the same context – that we are all priests within the church of Christ?

Post Modern Implications:

The priesthood of all believers is a statement that recognizes in profound ways the necessity of believers ministering to one another. ***Although personal salvation is an individual response, the journey is communal.*** We need one another along the way to see the loving face of Christ and to feel his caring touch through our sisters and brothers of faith. We need to encourage one another and build up one another in faith. We need to offer the gifts of grace, mercy and forgiveness within relationships and community. This is how the Gospel becomes alive for all.

In its purest form, the priesthood of all believers also defies the need for a hierarchical style of leadership and church governance. The church becomes self determined in that the vision for ministry comes from the body and interpretation of Scripture happens through communal study and Spirit revelation. Human beings are fallible and susceptible to corruption without accountability to the body of believers.

It also follows that anyone can administer the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper to a group of believers and it is not an ordained calling of a few. We are all commanded to participate in these directives from Christ. We see in our Lord the model of submission to John in his baptism and servitude to the disciples at the final meal, not a model of authority and position.

There should be no positions of power within a Baptist congregation. It is a priesthood of ALL believers. God bestows his spiritual gifts upon those he wills to serve in the body of Christ. The Scripture makes no gender description between those called to be teachers, preachers, administrators, those with prophetic gifting, etc. Nor is there a ranking of importance to these gifts. God calls the person by their gifts and the community's recognition of their gifting authorizes their leadership, regardless of gender.

Post-modern society is recognizing the wisdom of a team approach to management and has long accepted the gifting of women as team players. The post-modern church must reclaim the teaching of Scriptures in this regard and relinquish the idea of position and power, for one of gifting and serving.

Lesson #6: The Autonomy of the Local Church

Many Baptist congregations hold strongly to the distinctive of church autonomy, but it has been a source of struggle for Baptist denominational leaders. It is much simpler to have church bodies submit themselves to the leadership of their denomination but it is not necessarily the 'better way'.

Autonomy of individual churches is a natural follow-up to the distinctive of the individual liberty of the believer and the priesthood of the believers. Baptists are quite Pauline in their theology as they strongly embrace their freedom. Paul was so thrilled with the freedom that he found in Christ, that he was consequently appalled when Jewish Christians tried to put some conditions upon membership to the church or to salvation itself. Baptists also believe that freedom in Christ is essential to keeping the church pure and away from the corruption of institutionalism. Unfortunately, the church has become an institution. This cornerstone belief has the potential to be a renewing force to counter institutional trappings if the Holy Spirit is leading the renewal.

Read Colossians 1: 18

1. Who is the head and authority over the church?
2. How can this belief be practically worked out in the daily life of the local church?

Read Acts 15: 1 - 21

1. What is the positive role that leadership played in this situation?
2. What is the negative role that leadership played?
3. God knows the heart, but how can a church body know the heart of the individual? What are some signs that a person has truly been born of the Spirit? Is it important for the church to know the hearts of its fellowship?
4. How did the community begin to reinterpret their scriptures according to their new understandings of God's work among them? Is that a practice that should be relevant in today's church?
5. How was it important that the Antioch Christian community follow their conscience apart from the Jerusalem church?

Read Matthew 16: 13 - 20

1. What or who is it that Jesus has built his church upon?
2. The Catholic Church has used this passage to stress the importance of leadership or authority stemming from the person of Peter. What is another explanation for this passage and Jesus' response to Peter?
3. What is it about the church that Jesus has so much confidence that even the gates of hell will not overcome it?
4. What is the meaning of verse 19?

The consistent theme moving through our Baptist heritage is the theme of individual freedom in tangent with the importance of community. Individual believers congregate into families to study the scriptures, to break bread together and to learn from the teachings of the apostles. These communities also voluntarily connect with other communities to work toward common goals, such as supporting the poor, speaking out against social injustice and joint missionary efforts.

There is value in churches cooperating together for greater visions for the Kingdom. There is so much more that God can accomplish when there is unity of vision among churches and they pool their resources to reach their common dreams. Accountability to each local body to affirm that the projects and methods are still mutually agreed upon and resources are being used responsibly is crucial. And the individual must also seek God's truth and participate in decision making at all levels of the partnership. In other words, we should care about the work of the denomination and participate heartily in its work on our behalf.

Post-Modern Implications:

We have often thought negatively about the 'self-help' movement, believing that God is our only help, but many positive things have come out of this emphasis in secular society. For one thing, the role of the individual has been elevated from passive recipient to active participant. This is a wonderful gift to the church providing believers resist the tendency to be spiritual consumers looking to the church for various services, to truly participating in determining the spiritual direction of their particular congregation.

Quoting Charles Ringma in *Catch the Wind*: pgs. 98,99

Under such an arrangement, the needs, hopes and aspirations of people become central in the coming together for worship, prayer, listening to scripture and participating in the sacraments. Moreover, if people are setting the agenda for their life together under the lordship of Christ, then the role of the expert is only advisory and complimentary, not determinative as is the case in institutional Christianity. . . . maturity can only come when the people are the church and, under God, assume responsibility with its life and mission.

It is a significant part of our Baptist heritage to self – determine our spiritual lives as directed by the Holy Spirit dwelling within. It isn't done for us, we participate fully in making it happen. Therefore, we participate fully in the community we are a part of, and the communities we connect with on a greater, global level. A cooperative spirit enables our denomination to do great things for the kingdom of God.

Lesson # 7 - The Separation of Church and State

The importance of this teaching in our day and age may not be readily recognized as there is no demand by the Canadian government to join a certain denomination, adhere to certain doctrines, or pay excessive religious taxes. Canada provides for freedom of religion in its charter of rights and freedoms.

In recent days, this freedom has felt threatened as the government has become involved in issues such as the defining of marriage which, though not viewed as a sacrament by Baptists, is most certainly held sacred by most religions and denominations. The church, in turn, has increasingly placed more pressure upon the government to create laws to either affirm or guard against certain moral and ethical stances. Our American neighbors to the south have greatly muddied the waters as religion plays greater importance in politics and what has become a mutual “back-scratching” for personal gain.

The issue isn't as clear as we would like it to be. Should religious freedom grant the Jim Jones and the David Koreshes of the world freedom to brainwash followers to a path of death? Do we want a religion that practices polygamy to be free to practice beliefs that capture and enslave young girls as in Bountiful, BC? Would we like the government to financially support Christian schools and other religious schools, even if those schools indoctrinate children and takes away their freedom of choice?

Read Acts 4: 18 – 20

1. What issues were facing the early Christian leaders in their efforts to spread the Gospel?
2. How was the government of their time hindering their efforts?
3. What was their stand when faced with opposition from their governing authorities?

Read Romans 13: 1 – 7

1. Considering that Christians were still facing persecution and in fact, Paul was likely under house arrest when he wrote this, what is he asking of Christians in regard to secular authorities?
2. What is your belief about those elected to the government of Canada? Do you believe they are there according to God's will, as this passage infers?
3. What does this verse mean to you when taken along side of the previous passage in Acts?

Read I Timothy 2: 1 – 4

1. How faithful are we in praying for those in government? In what ways could the church be more deliberate in its efforts to pray for our country's governance?
2. How might our prayers be a witness to our goodness, and what part might they play in helping "all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of truth?"

Read Matthew 22: 15 - 22

1. What is Jesus' attitude toward the governing authorities?
2. In what ways did Jesus adhere to the laws of the land, and in what ways did he separate himself from earthly rule?
3. From the scriptures, how did Jesus deal with moral issues? Is there any evidence that he went after or took on the Roman authorities in how they were governing the land?
4. Jesus spoke out strongly against injustice and yet spoke little on issue of morality. Are there ways that the modern church becomes more concerned about moral issues than it does issues of oppression and injustice and the rights of the poor?
5. Should the church and clergy be given tax breaks from the government such as pastoral housing allowances and exception from land taxes? Is this true separation of church and state?

Post-Modern Implications

True separation of church and state is essential for the Christian church to be solely accountable to God through the individual and collective hearts and consciences of the believers. We must be willing to give up any sense of privilege that might compromise our integrity under the rule of God. Persecution was expected by the early Christian church. The North American church needs to be more prepared and willing to face persecution for its stands against laws that favor the rich and discriminate against the poor, for laws that leave the weak vulnerable and defenseless, and increase the might of the already powerful.

It is also vital that the church accept the kinds of laws that may hinder some religious freedom in order to protect its citizens. Any religion whose practices violate the rights of women, promotes slavery, causes injury or harm cannot be allowed to practice regardless of human dignity.

Our governing authorities are responsible to protect people from abuse. Religious institutions must be accountable to these governing bodies and abuse of any kind should not be tolerated. Conversely, Religion is necessary within culture to provide a community to nurture and feed the spiritual lives of individuals according to the directives of God. The Government must not hinder the people from following their spiritual hearts and consciences.

Lesson #8: Leadership through two offices of Pastor and Deacon.

It is important to distinguish between authority and leadership. There is a certain amount of authority that comes with a position or title. That person may not be a particularly good leader, or even be worthy of the trust that comes with the position. Baptist Heritage is very wary of blanket authority given to positions. Strong, godly leadership, on the other hand, is valued and respected. Authority is granted to the person, not the position. The qualifications rest solidly on the heart of the person receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. When wisdom, vision, giftedness and a servant heart are recognized, the leader is then granted the authority to guide the flock, along with a group of elders or deacons to which he or she is accountable. The congregation is responsible to be involved with the leadership in discerning God's will for the life of the congregation as a whole. This is not a system of hierarchy, but rather, an authorizing of giftedness.

Read Philippians 1:1

1. In this verse we see that the early church was organized around two distinct positions of leadership, but their actual job descriptions are not spelled out. How would you define these two functions within the church?

Read I Timothy 3: 1 – 13

1. Which comes first, the position and then the character, or the character and then the position?
2. Why does Paul spell out the various requirements for church leaders in this way?
3. What are some of the qualifications that you recognize as important in church leaders today?
4. Can you discern what might be the job description of overseers and deacons from this passage? What is the authority of the position based upon?
5. Do you feel that this passage speaks to gender differences between roles in the church and those who qualify as leaders? Is there room for women in the leadership of the church?

Read Acts 6: 1 – 7

1. How did the early church decide what positions of leadership they needed and how did they go about filling those positions.
2. What criteria were they looking for?
3. Why did the apostles need others in leadership roles? What was the primary responsibility of the apostles? How do we relate that to the church today?
4. What is the balance between positions of authority and positions of service? Is there a difference?

Summary:

The Eight Baptist Distinctives are not theological statements or doctrinal truths, but underlying principals for practicing our faith. Freedom in Christ is the value which defines how Baptists endeavor to be the body of Christ, based as closely to the model found in Scripture as can be discerned. We often lose sight of these intrinsic values by the structures and programs of the modern church.

Quoting Charles Ringma in *Catch the Wind*: pgs. 126, 127, 130

A far closer approximation to the New Testament picture of church than the 'guardianship' model of the Roman Catholic and Reformation churches which see to 'manage' society is the Anabaptist model of the church as a counter community . . . the church is not to rule society. It is to be a servant instead. . . . Rather than guardianship, with its implicit idea that a stronger, wiser, more mature person needs to guard and direct our lives, the New Testament celebrates the notion of people empowerment. People with a new sense of identity because of their experience of Christ's salvation are brought into a common fraternity based on caring and sharing relationships, taking responsibility for their own lives and for their desire to be the transformative agents in the world.

Post modern Implications:

I have not attempted to define "post-modern", primarily because it is almost impossible to do in a decisive way. My premise is that the Western world is thinking in a new way and this new thinking will affect the Christian church, for better or for worse. One catch word is 'decentralization' – the idea that truth isn't necessarily going to be found in one place at one time. Individual response and experience are parts of the equation more than 'knowledge' or external authority. We can no longer control what people are exposed to – to indoctrinate our children or congregations into certain ways of thinking. The world is wide open through a global neighborhood and world wide internet communications.

It is also clear that at the heart of post-modern thinking is a search for the spiritual. The modern age of mechanism, rational thinking, cold fact and secularization is coming to an end. It has left the world wanting – and these hearts are turning to find God, somehow, somewhere.

It is crucial that the church be a safe place to ask questions, to seek truth, to experience the God who loves us and is seeking us ruthlessly and with abandon. Our eight Baptist Distinctives provide room for those seeking to find the great "Who" they are looking for. The primary principle of liberty provides room for the Holy Spirit to touch hearts and lives. We cannot know all the ways that God will come to people or what God may reveal about divine Mystery. The church is a place of seeking and learning. That is the definition of a disciple – a teachable heart. Jesus is the teacher. Jesus is the authority – the head of the church. Perhaps the best we can hope for as his earthly body, it to not get in the way so that the Spirit can reach those he seeks.