

Baptist churches



Baptist church in Alabama, USA. Most Baptist churches look like ordinary houses or town halls

The name 'Baptist' comes from the Baptist practice of immersion in water.

History

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

Thomas Helwys founded the first Baptist Church in England in 1612. Throughout the seventeenth century Baptists were persecuted for their beliefs, being known as 'nonconformists' or 'Dissenters'. They refused to become members of the Church of England, saying Christ - and not the monarch - was head of the Church.

Today, Baptists are represented globally by the Baptist World Alliance which was founded in 1905. Baptists form the fifth largest Christian church in the world. Baptist churches are found in almost every country in the world and have about 40 million members worldwide. In Britain 2,150 churches belong to the Baptist Union of Great Britain, between them having 150,000 members.

In 2009 Baptists celebrated the 400th anniversary of the birth of the Baptist movement.



Structure

John the Baptist with a Baptist cross

Equality

In the Baptist movement everyone is equal. There is no hierarchy of bishops or priests exercising authority over members.

Congregational

Baptists are congregational: each church is self-governing, made up of members, each with a role to play. Final authority rests not with the minister or deacons but with church members at the meeting.

Distinguishing features

Baptism of believers by full immersion

This is perhaps the most obvious difference between Baptists and other denominations. Baptists reject infant baptism, thinking instead that baptism is for believers only - those who can personally declare Jesus as Lord.

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

Priesthood of all

Baptists believe everyone, ordained or lay, is responsible before God for his/her own understanding of God's word and what it means to them. They believe God created every individual with the skills to be a priest for themselves and others. That means that in Baptist churches which appoint a minister, he or she is an equal member in the church meeting but with special responsibilities which have been given to him or her by the congregation.

Congregational

Baptists believe in congregational church government. That is, each church can govern itself.

Separation of church and state

As each Baptist church governs itself there can be no outside interference in decision making. Therefore Baptists reject the idea of an established or state church.

