

# Practices of the south baptist church

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The History of the South Baptist Church According to Henry Vedder's book, A Short History of the Baptists, the Southern Baptist Church's beginning is connected with John Smyth and the separatist movement that started in England in the early 17th century (Verder, 2010).

John Smyth held the strong belief that infant baptism was not befitting the New Testament Christianity. He lived this faith to the extent that he re-baptized many followers including himself in the process of promoting the belief. A strong reformation followed that led to the beginning of the English Baptist Church. By the mid 17th century, Smyth and a fellow reformist, Thomas Hewleys, started more than fifty Baptist churches in England (Benedict, 2001). The new church denomination faced a lot of religious persecution based on their stand on the new baptism. This prompted followers such as Roger Williams to flee to the North America.

There, they propagated the same belief and went further to establish churches. In doing so, the Baptist Church opened a new window into the American society. The First Baptist Church in the USA in the Rhode Island was a result of the work this reformist. The church spread its wings in the 18th century to North Carolina. This was pioneered by Jonathan Edwards who was credited for the Great Awakening that led to an increase in the believers of this new faith (Southern Baptist Convention, 2012). In addition to adult baptism by immersion in much water, they also believed in community membership, emotional conversion and accountability.

Just as the genesis is to many churches, the Southern Baptist Church also called the South Baptist Convention, SBC, separated from the mainstream

church due to religious conflicts and interpretation of conflicts (Baker, 1974). The expansion of the Baptists in the USA led to the formation of mission groups that would facilitate further spreading of the Christian lifestyle to others locations of the continent. One mission society moved to the South, and one remained as the Home Mission Society. The Southern groups held a little different perspective concerning slavery from that of their fellow Northerners. The controversy surrounding slavery, among other factors, was the immediate cause of the division (Benedict, 2001). The northern group stood against race-based slavery and discrimination while their fellow southerners were in support of slavery.

The Northerners argued that a missionary could not continue with the mission work while he was still a slaveholder. The southerners, in controversy, specifically recommended a slaveholder, James E. Reeve to take up mission work. The Home Mission rejected him based on other reasons and not on the fact that he was a slaveholder (Baker, 2001). In addition, the Baptists in the south complained that they were not receiving financial support for the missionary duties.

The southerners also perceived that the Home Mission Society appointed less number of missionaries to the South than it did to the North. Other differences emerged when the North Baptist group wanted different denominational structure to that proffered by the South Baptists. The North preferred a ministry centered on the members paying yearly dues. On the other hand, the Southern group preferred church formed organization with various ministries under the leadership of one organization (Benedict, 2001). These issues led to the division of the two groups and the birth of the South

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Baptist Church after the 1845 Southern Baptist Convention in Augusta, Georgia.

The convention transformed into a different Baptist denomination that grew tremendously in the 19th and 20th centuries. Benedict (2001) points out that, the South Baptists claim to have over sixteen million members worldwide and grow by an average of one thousand members per day.

**Beliefs and Structure of the South Baptist Church** The structure of the South Baptist Church is, just as its name suggests, more of a congregation body of churches united by same practice and beliefs, but not a single community with hierarchical leadership. The structure of the convention explains its beliefs and practices. Such beliefs include Voluntarism, Pietism and Sectarianism (Cooper, 2007). Voluntarism in the Baptist Church means that a believer is individually responsible for his or her relationship with God and freely chooses to believe in God.

One of the characteristic beliefs that unify them is the belief and practice of adult baptism. This is a fundamental tenet of faith. They strongly reject infant baptism. View child baptism to be inappropriate since the child is too young to understand and freely choose the path of its life. Instead, they practice child dedication where a child's parents commit the child to God just as Jesus' parents did. According to the Baptists, baptism is for adult believers only.

They consider adult baptism by way of immersion to be a significant, symbolic act of Christian ordinance for those who believe (Cooper, 2007). Though it does not have any power to bring change, it is an act that

symbolizes what Christ did in his death, burial and resurrection as well as picturing a new birth for a believer. The Baptists believe that baptism does not bring salvation, but it is a testimony of salvation. After conversions into Christianity through salvation, Baptists baptize persons as a symbol of membership. Another area of the South Baptists' belief is in the authority of the church.

Each of the Baptist Churches exercises autonomy. This form of denominational independence characterizes the South Baptist Churches. Firstly, the structure of the church places authority in matters concerning faith and religion on the individual believer. Secondly, authority of the church lies within the local church congregation and not in traditional or religious texts (Cooper, 2007). They practice voluntarism in church leadership. The church authority consists of a church pastor and the elders popularly known as deacons.

The members select a pastor who is later ordained. The church also elects the deacons. A pastor and the church are not under a bishop or any other hierarchical body. Each church owns its own property including the land and buildings. Any church has the freedom of joining the South Baptist Convention or opting out of it.

This structure owes its origin to the South Baptist Convention of 1845. The South Baptist Church's belief in Voluntarism also emphasizes Pietism (Cornhill, 2001). A person deals with God straightly and not through a mediator. According to Barker (1974), Pietism protected the believers from dictatorial and autocratic powers and leaders who would subvert believers

from true religion. This gives believers religious liberty where all believers have equal access to God (Cornhill, 2001).

The South Baptist Church has its foundation grounded in Evangelism and salvation of believers. They hold the belief that all humans are sinful and short of the glory of God and therefore, need to hear the good-news that Jesus Christ came to redeem them from sins by paying their penalties. Forgiveness and salvation comes only through believing in Jesus Christ Besides, one can receive it freely. This salvation comes with the faith in believing that Jesus Christ is the only way to God and heaven. They believe that the Holy Spirit brings about once one receives Jesus Christ who guides the person's life into the new life. They hold on to the fact that regeneration is God's own working in us but not the working of the believer.

They enhance evangelism through various mission groups that preach the good-news (Southern Baptist Convention, 2012). The Bible forms the center of all scriptures of the South Baptist Church. They regard it as the inspired word of God. The teachings of the New Testament on matters of life and Christianity are core and vital. One of the grounds of Baptists separation after the Reformation based on complete teaching of the New Testament concerning is true baptism, marriage and Christian faith which they strongly adhere to. The genesis of the South Baptist Church owes to the formation of a different church structure than that of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Catholics emphasized infant baptism contrary to the complete teaching of the New Testament. One can observe that the beliefs, structure and practices of the Baptists are contrasting to that of the Catholic Church. The

emphasis on voluntarism, adult baptism, and lack of hierarchical leadership are all opposite to the structure and practice of the Roman Catholic Church. Baptists still propagate their founders' belief that true New Testament Church should have its beliefs and practices based on the Scripture. This in turn, will define the structure of the church. Although each Baptist Church has many differences in terms of the Mosaic Law and the Gospel, the ordination of women, the end of times among others, the South Baptist Convention remains to be the biggest denomination among the Baptists and the protestant groups.

It is clear that its structure and emphasis on the independence of believers and church sponsors, the growth and expansion of the church.