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History of the Baptist Denomination

The Baptist denomination is one of the largest and oldest denominations in all of Christianity. From its origins to the current day, it has grown across the globe as well as in population. A study of the denomination reveals many interesting facts.

It is generally agreed upon that the beginnings of the Baptist denomination are traced to one John Smyth, who, in 1609, led a group of Separatists to the Netherlands to begin the General Baptist Church (Baptists). From then on, Smyth's followers increased and spread across Scandinavia as well as the rest of Europe. The Baptists, as they began to be called, continued to grow and tell others of their Protestant faith. One of the more attractive characteristics of the group to outsiders was the stark doctrinal differences between them and the traditional Catholic Church. The Baptists strongly disagreed with the practice of "sprinkling a baby with water" and calling the baby officially "saved" or "Catholic". They are the people credited with first introducing "believer's baptism" in

which a person is baptized when he realizes his sinfulness and accepts God as his personal Lord and Savior. Also, the Baptists, even more than most other Protestant denominations, strongly encouraged the practice of reading and interpreting the Bible for oneself and not allowing a priest to read it for you or to you. They were strong proponents of the belief that religion is an issue between God and each and every individual and that God wants to have a relationship with every person. As the years passed, the Baptists grew and became an outspoken enemy, along with other Protestants, of the Catholic Church. As usual, the onset of rebelliousness to the norm sparked the beginning of persecution on the outspoken Protestant denominations. When the Catholic Church began imposing persecution of its own on the Protestants for not complying with its rules and regulations, many Baptists decided that they had had enough. Desperately wanting to rid themselves of the Catholic rule, all Protestants began to whisper about a new opportunity, a new land, and religious freedom. Baptists, Methodists, and Puritans alike decided to leave their current lives behind and sail for America to try and afford themselves, as well as their children, the opportunity for religious freedom.

At the start of the 1600s, there was plenty of optimism among Protestants and every group of people who were opposed to the Catholic reign. A new land had been found and there was unimaginable opportunity for unprecedented freedom as well as a new start in a new place. The fact that the new continent was found precisely as the religious unrest began in Europe seemed to match perfectly together for the Baptists to escape and worship God any way they wanted to. As the new continent began to slowly fill with different denominations, the individual areas and colonies turned into safe havens for the different groups of people. Whereas many Anglicans seemed to amble toward the Southern colonies, the Northern colonies tended to be a home for many Congregationalists (Mansfield 18). However, there was never any specific setting where the Baptists made themselves at home, and they tended to spread out over the entire land. The earliest recorded existence of the Baptist church in America is in the mid-seventeenth century when Roger Williams is believed to have begun a Baptist church in Providence, Rhode Island (Baptists). Overtime, the New World grew into colonies as more and more frontiers were settled and homes and churches began to appear across the land. For the next century-and-a-half, the Baptists were

instrumental in helping to mold and shape America into a God-fearing, Christian land that ultimately decided to fight for freedom from the rule of unyielding England. It has often been said that if not for the unquenchable faith of the leaders of the country, that a War for Independence would have been futile at best. The fact that a nation of rebels could somehow defeat the strongest superpower of the times points to the unstoppable prayers of the faithful and the clear path of provision provided by God.

Ever since that Revolutionary War, the Baptists have grown in many ways. What sets them apart from most other religious groups is their lack of a central governing body. The consensus among Baptists is that the personal relationship between God and the individual should not stop there. They believe that the individual churches themselves should interpret the Bible each to the best of their understanding (Baptists). This has been a common point of attack to the denomination from critics. The question usually asked is, "How can a denomination with the common name of 'Baptists' be divided into more than one group or organization and believe, in many cases, very different things?" It is indeed true that there are numerous different churches across the country that often have some "off-the-wall" doctrine or practice that they

execute but they place the name "Baptist" on their title simply for appearance's sake. However, in the United States, there are two churches that have outgrown the others. The Southern Baptist Churches (SBC) and the American Baptist Churches (ABC) are the largest in the country with the former being the more conservative of the two (Baptists). Of the two, the Southern Baptist is the larger (Fairchild), so an examination of it would be helpful.

The Southern Baptist Convention, with over 37,000 churches, is the second largest religious body in the United States, trailing only the Catholic Church (The Largest). Many Southern Baptists are often tagged with the name "evangelical Christians", most often used by the electronic or print media during elections for public office. As one might expect, the SBC is spread almost exclusively across the southern part of America. Over half of all Southern Baptists in the world live in the states of Alabama, Texas, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee (The Largest). It is also not surprising that the states with the highest proportion of Southern Baptists to population are Mississippi (33.8%), Alabama (32.5%), Oklahoma (30.7%), Tennessee (27.5%), and Kentucky (26.1%) (The Largest). It is consistently reflected during Presidential elections

that the Southern Baptists play a huge role in the election as, year after year, the Conservative Republican party is constantly awarded the electoral votes of almost the entire Southern section of the country. Despite the progressing liberal movement sweeping over most of America, and predominately the Northeast, the Bible belt, as the South is called, continues to hold to traditional and Biblical values and refuses to be moved off its beliefs.

Maybe the most glaring thing that John Smyth, Shubael Steams and their co-founders of the Baptist denomination would be most proud of their descendants is in world evangelization. The denomination has grown from a small church in the Netherlands to completely covering the globe in nearly every country. In the United States alone, there are 68,852 churches with a total of 21,121,537 members who call themselves some form of Baptist (Member). However, the denomination is in no way confined simply to the borders of America. As of 1 September 2007, the Baptist World Alliance confirmed the following numbers regarding Baptist churches and members across the world: Africa: 30,519 churches, 7,252,801 members; Asia: 41,781 churches, 5,264,784 members; Europe: 12,854 churches, 789,487; Middle East: 83 churches, 5,450 members (Member). The sheer presence of a single denomination in so many corners of the

world is proof of the human race longing for something more to believe in besides themselves. Few denominations on earth can claim to have given as much of themselves and their faith to the nations as the Baptists.

It is common knowledge that the Baptists are an amazing people. It's crystal clear how much impact they have had on this country as well as the world. If America hopes for its future to be as great as its glorious past, it would be wise to not forsake the teachings of the Baptists and the extent of their convictions. If one were to look at the current state of America, it is not likely he would be overwhelmed with optimism. Stephen Mansfield, a Christian political consultant and New York Times best-selling author, says: "It was Karl Marx who said that 'a people without a heritage are easily persuaded.' He might also have said that a heritage forgotten or misremembered has the same effect, and in few countries on earth is this more starkly illustrated than in the United States," (Mansfield 5). Stephen Mansfield is exactly right: America is suffering. However, there is no doubt that even when all hope appears lost, the Baptists will be praying unceasingly for this great nation.