

**Baptist churches**

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

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.

The name 'Baptist' comes from the Baptist practice of immersion in water. It was coined in the seventeenth century by opponents to the new movement but rejected by followers themselves. It wasn't until the nineteenth century that Baptists accepted the use of the label to describe themselves.

**History**

The roots of the Baptist movement date back to the sixteenth century and the post-Reformation period, although 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.

Smyth and Helwys had left England for Holland in 1607 after being persecuted for wanting to purify the Church of England of all traces of **Roman Catholicism**. Both Smyth and Helwys had joined a group of 'Separatists' in Gainsborough in 1606. Their three core beliefs went on to shape later Baptists. They were:

1. The Bible, not church tradition or religious creed, was the guide in all matters of faith and practice.
2. The church should be made up of believers only, not all people born in the local parish.
3. The church should be governed by those believers, not by hierarchical figures like bishops.

Eventually Smyth and Helwys parted company in Holland as Smyth questioned the authenticity of his self-administered baptism. In 1612 Helwys and others returned to England to establish the first Baptist Church on English soil.

Baptists initially developed in two streams of theological thought:

1. General Baptists believed that when Christ died on the cross he died for everyone in general.
2. Particular Baptists followed the Calvinist tradition of believing that Christ died for a particular group or elect.

These two groups eventually came together in 1813 to form a General Union, which became the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland in the late nineteenth century.

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.

The nineteenth century saw a period of significant growth for the Baptist movement. Great preachers such as Charles Haddon Spurgeon in London and Alexander Maclaren in Manchester drew crowds in their thousands.

Today, Baptists are represented globally by the Baptist World Alliance which was founded in 1905. It provides an international forum for the exchange of Baptist thought, paying special attention to matters concerning Christian education, religious freedom, human rights and missions.

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