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Differences Among Baptists

Free Will Baptists Contrasted
with Southern Baptists

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Similarities

All Baptists share some things in common. We share a common heritage that can be traced to the early English Dissenters of the 17th century. Exactly when and where Baptists came to America is somewhat debatable; however, the fact that they did isn't debatable. By the early 18th century there were many Baptist congregations in America.

A second thing that nearly all Baptists share in common is the ordinance of baptism; especially the baptism of believers by immersion. While there are some Baptist groups that practice infant baptism, the vast majority do not. Additionally, not all Baptist groups use immersion as the method of baptism, but again, the vast majority do.

Third, nearly all Baptist groups practice an "open" table during the Lord's Supper observance. What this means is that all believers are welcome to participate in this ordinance, regardless of church membership. There are some that do not practice an open observance, but most do.

Differences

So, with those similarities defined, let's look at specific differences between Free Will Baptists and the most prominent Baptist group in America, Southern Baptists.

Historically, Southern Baptists formed during the 19th century primarily as a result of the issue of slave ownership. Free Will Baptists, generally speaking, were committed to the abolitionist movement. Southern Baptists have remained a denomination since their formation in the 19th century. Free Will Baptists were a strong denomination from the 18th century until the early 20th century when a merger with the North American Baptists split the denomination. The current denomination was formed in 1935, and is therefore only about 80 years old.

Obviously, there is a huge difference in the size of the denominations. Southern Baptists are the largest Baptist group in America, with more than 15 million members in over 46,000 congregations. Free Will Baptists comprise just over 300,000 members in approximately 2,500 congregations. This difference in size means a significant difference in the size of ministries, number of missionaries, etc.

There is a difference in the variation of theological beliefs. Southern Baptists trace their theological standards to the Particular Baptists of the 18th century. These Baptist groups held to John Calvin's theology. Today, Southern Baptists may or may not be true "five-point" Calvinists, but nearly all hold to Calvin's 5th point, perseverance. Nearly unanimously, Southern Baptists believe that all true followers of Jesus Christ will remain in fellowship with God and will persevere in faith. Free Will Baptists trace their theological heritage to the General Baptists of the 18th century, as such we hold to the theological teachings of Jacob Arminius. As Arminian Baptists, we believe that perseverance is coupled with faith, thus we believe in the possibility of apostasy on the part of a believer. In other words, even a true follower of Jesus Christ can remove themselves from their relationship with Christ.

Additionally, if this happens, we believe it is impossible for the person to regain their relationship with Christ and they are eternally lost.

Another difference between Southern Baptists and Free Will Baptists is in the area of ordinances. Both Southern Baptists and Free Will Baptists practice the ordinances of baptism and observance of the Lord's Supper, Free Will Baptists also practice a third ordinance, Washing the Saint's Feet. We believe that Jesus commanded His disciples to observe this practice in the 13th chapter of John's gospel, and so we observe it in our churches.

Other differences between Southern Baptists and Free Will Baptists tend to be regional or cultural, and not very significant.