



# URBAN CURRENT

## What's in a name?

**D**enominational tags have fallen on hard times. History and tradition seem to be bad baggage these days.

I would be surprised if you know of a new church that can be identified with any recognizable branch of Christianity. This, in the name of eliminating barriers to reaching people. If you can get a creek, river, brook, or a tree into your name, for sure you will grow.

The more blah, bland, comforting, serene, the more easily confused with a country club or a rock band your church name is, the more in tune with the times you appear.

It seems the latest trend has abandoned nature. Bridge. Soma. Journey. Radiance. Paradox. Propulsion.

In the interest of transparency, I began a move to change our church name 15 or 20 years ago, then chickened out. Baptist is still our middle name.

Not sure where all this will go. Fads fade. Trends pass. The gates of hell will not prevail against the church of Jesus Christ.

My attempt to give a bit of context and explanation for our church name to a deep blue, urban, postmodern population is what follows.

### What's In a Name?

John the Baptist, eccentric prophet. William Carey, linguist, humanitarian extraordinaire. Frederick Douglas, abolitionist- orator. Charles Spurgeon, urban crusader. Nannie Helen Borrroughs, women's leader. Walter Rauschenbusch, social justice warrior. Lottie Moon, China champion. Martin Luther King, renowned activist. Billy Graham, global evangelist. Mahalia Jackson, vocalist without equal. Rick Warren, mega-church pastor, best-selling author. Baptist is a name associated with colorful, controversial, influential figures here and around the world.

There are approximately 32 million Baptists in the U.S., over 100 million in the world, and over 200 different Baptist conventions, fellowships, and associations. Some of these

organizations are international, some are national, some are language based, others are ethnically centered.

This may be helpful. There is no "The Baptist Church." Each Baptist congregation is independent, autonomous, self-governing. Many churches participate in larger entities such as the Baptist Bible Fellowship International, the National Baptist Convention, etc. However, those affiliations do not infringe upon congregational self-determination. Yes, this lends itself to some craziness and confusion. It is what it is.

Baptists are not self-named. Our persecutors began using this label in derision beginning in the 1400s.

Baptists are not Protestants. Baptists never protested and "came out" of the Roman Catholic Church as mainline Protestant groups did in the Reformation.

Theologically and historically, Baptists are those who hold the Word of God, the Scriptures, the Bible, as sole authority in all matters of faith, church order, and practice rather than looking to tradition, human hierarchies, committees, or governments.

Many historians seemingly fail to notice that many who came to America for religious freedom, instituted the same state church systems, persecuting those who did not adhere, repeating the sins of the governments they fled.

In U.S. history, Rhode Island, the first colony with complete religious freedom, was founded by Baptist Roger Williams. Williams's life was a crusade for freedom of conscience and religious liberty. He founded Rhode Island in 1636 after purchasing the land from the Narragansett Indians.

"The English ... justified their grabbing of Indian land by claiming that these simple folk did not really believe in property rights." Williams argued, "The Native Americans did make claims to property, claims that must be respected. The Natives are very exact and punctual in the bounds of their Lands,

belonging to this or that Prince or People,' even bargaining among themselves for a small piece of ground."

A refuge from religious persecution, Rhode Island became home to the first Jewish synagogue in America and a sanctuary for Quakers who were being persecuted and killed by anti-Quaker laws in Massachusetts and other colonial territories. Rhode Island was an open door to all people, a safe harbor in a sea of tyranny and oppression.

In the flurry of activity around the colonies becoming states, the constitution presented for ratification did not provide for religious liberty. Baptists supported the proposed constitution on the condition an amendment on religious freedom would be added.

Finally, Massachusetts and Virginia became the pivotal states in the process. James Madison was running for the state legislature of Virginia against Baptist pastor John Leland. Madison was about to lose the election. Leland knew this. He also knew without Madison's golden voice and political influence there would be no constitution. With victory already in his hand, Leland dropped out of the race, giving Madison an open road on the promise that he would pursue language providing for religious liberty.

So sympathetic was Congress, urged on by President Washington, that they made it their first business to consider the issue Baptists were pressing. As a result, the line of the 1st Amendment reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ..."

Baptist then is not a "brand name" so much as it is a historical, theological descriptor of people who adhere to Biblical authority over human authority and are advocates of religious liberty for all.

by Charles Lyons, Pastor  
Armitage Baptist Church,  
Chicago, Illinois  
charles.lyons@armitagechurch.org

