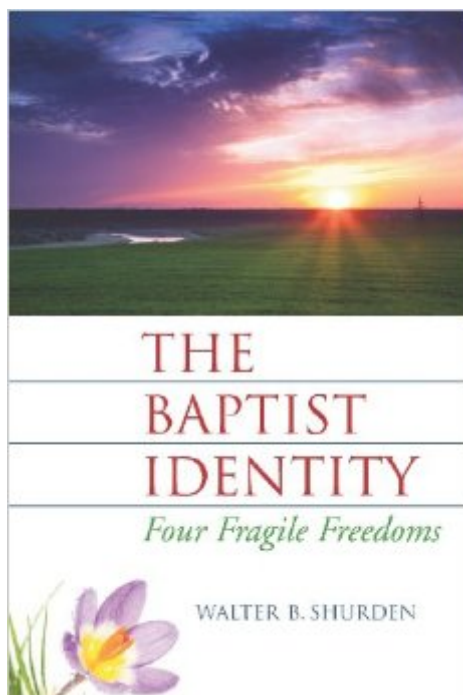


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# The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms



## Synopsis

Shurden examines the meaning of being Baptist by chiseling a Baptist profile and identifying freedoms commonly found in Baptist sermons, addresses, and confessions of faith.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I first encountered this book in a college course on Baptist Heritage. Over the years I have used it as a teaching guide for Sunday School classes, as a resource for sermon materials, and for seminars on what it means to be Baptist. Shurden defines Baptists clearly and cogently in a manner that is easy to read, yet full of substance. I strongly recommend this book to persons interested in learning about Baptists, but have been put off by the publicity of the Southern Baptist Convention in recent years. It's good material for persons new to Baptist life/churches.

Walter B. Shurden is a well-known Baptist historian, author, educator and editor. I disagree with some of Mr. Shurden's conclusions, but I recommend that this book be purchased and read. The work is thought-provoking, scholarly and the research is thorough. In his book, *The Baptist Identity*, Walter Shurden sets out to answer the question "What makes a Baptist a Baptist?" He says "what I have tried to do in this book" is define the essence of what constitutes being a Baptist. So he sets out to find any "spiritual and theological marks", any "generic distinctives", "any peculiar convictions" that Baptists have in common and that make them Baptist. To be a "five-star" book, Shurden must accomplish this purpose. Shurden tells us when and how he arrived at his consensus of Baptist

distinctives, as presented in his Four Fragile Freedoms. "I first identified the four freedoms discussed in this book in the concluding chapter of my book 'The Life of Baptists in the Life of the World,' published in 1985." He goes on to note, "I arrived at these Baptist Freedoms by analyzing the sermons and addresses given by Baptists from around the world at the meetings of the Baptist World Alliance from 1905 to 1980." Herein lies what I believe was Mr. Shurden's mistake -- his conviction that sermons and addresses given by Baptists at the Baptist World Alliance is the best place to look to find Baptist distinctives. I think such a conclusion is mistaken because it is too narrow.<sup>1</sup> The time element (1905-1980) is too narrow. Looking in this time frame alone dismisses a large volume of Baptist thought prior to 1905. Shurden believes that Baptists arose out of English Separatism in the early 1600's. But he does not investigate what was distinctive in that time that caused those men/churches to leave Separatism and become Baptist, nor does he look the 300 years following. The time period is 75 years, but it also only represents 14 meetings of the Baptist World Alliance (see Dictionary of Baptists or BWA on Wikipedia, e.g.). The bibliography also reveals almost entirely 20th century sources.<sup>2</sup> The "Baptist variety" element is too narrow. It might seem that a sampling of Baptists from across the world would give the best variety. Though there were approximately 135 Baptist bodies represented in the BWA at the time of Shurden's writing, the purpose of the BWA somewhat skews the type of Baptists that participate. The numerical majority of Baptists in America were represented in the BWA then (due to the presence of the Southern Baptist Convention). Nevertheless, only 14 of over 50 groups of Baptists in the United States belonged to the Baptist World Alliance. In England, only the liberal open membership Baptist Union is represented. Albert W. Wardin, Jr. [BWA member and author of the Baptist Atlas] identifies three broad divisions of Baptists worldwide -- mainline ecumenical, conservative evangelical, and separatist fundamental (p. 3), and says that the BWA "includes all Baptists of the first party and a good cross section of bodies in the second party but none of the third group."<sup>3</sup> The content element is too narrow. Shurden pulls his information from "sermons and addresses...at meetings of the Baptist World Alliance." With no intended disrespect for Baptist intelligentsia, it is my opinion that the people who would be invited to speak at the Baptist World Alliance probably are not the best representatives of what rank and file Baptists really are -- not necessarily even the rank and file of those bodies affiliated with the BWA. One could probably find a broader sampling other than those who spoke before the BWA. The fourfold purpose of the BWA is to unite Baptists worldwide, lead in evangelism, respond to people in need, and defend human rights [Baptist Atlas, 1995, p. xxx]. This fourfold purpose of the BWA surely affects and limits the type of speakers who would be chosen to address the assemblies. Shurden's "four freedoms" are a fair representation of commonalities in the

sermons and addresses given by speakers at the Baptist World Alliance. How well do these speakers represent the constituency of the BWA, and how well can they represent Baptists as a whole? Mr. Shurden chose this format in which to frame his argument, and therefore it is his task to convince us that this is a broad enough pool of Baptist thought and representative of the broader body of Baptists. In my opinion, he fails to do so. Another book that addresses the Baptist identity is *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* by R. Stanton Norman (Broadman & Holman, 2001). It comes from a different perspective as well as a different methodology. Mr. Norman investigates a broad range of writings in a distinct body of literature that consciously addresses Baptist distinctives -- "What makes a Baptist a Baptist". Those interested in buying Mr. Shurden's book should also consider buying Norman's book.

A truly excellent book for Baptists and Protestants of similar mind who hold to the Baptist tradition of freedom, and for those who are interested in learning more about it. For me, it is a wonderful intersection between theology and church history. Finally, the appendices are well chosen voices from Baptist history. There is nothing quite like reading these for oneself, rather than another's summary of them.

I wanted to firm up my understanding of Baptist ideological thought, and this book provided an in-depth history and insight into the Baptist traditions, thinking, and theological basis. I came away knowing more about the Baptist way of life than many Baptist parishioners, who were literally born as Baptists.\*\* - of course, Baptist polity will teach you that Baptists firmly believe in choice and free-will, so no one is born a Baptist.

Interesting book. This would be useful for someone who wants to understand where Baptists stand on religious freedom. The author concludes by reminding us that our religious freedoms must be protected or we run the risk of losing them. I liked that Shurden writes in a very readable style. What could have been a dry subject was not presented that way at all.

Absolutely the best book on Baptist doctrine and distinctives for use in the church. Easily taught by clergy or lay person and easily understood by the student. Highly recommend it.

Written on the level of "The Baptist Faith and Message"

Very Good and Very informative. I highly recommend the reading of this book because we tend to take for granted the freedoms that allows us to stand and proclaim God's Holy word to the world. Upon reading this book we will realize how fragile our freedoms are becoming in bringing the word of God to a dying world.

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