

# Our Baptist Heritage

*Dr. Scott Callaham*

Baptist Theological Seminary, Singapore – 24 March 2017

Good morning, everyone! I am thankful for the opportunity to share with you a bit this morning. Today's topic is "Our Baptist Heritage." Now as we begin our meeting, I invite you to pray with me.

"Our dear heavenly Father, this morning we praise you and worship you. You alone are worthy of our praise and service. May this lecture be pleasing to you, and may whatever results from it bring you glory. We submit to your will as revealed through your word, and ask that you use us to be a channel of blessing to carry out your will. In the name of our redeemer Jesus Christ we pray. Amen."

Now regarding "Our Baptist Heritage," maybe someone here might be thinking, "Why do we need to discuss such a sectarian topic?" Well, actually I think that there are a few relatively important reasons, to begin with the fact that our Christian community is called Baptist Theological Seminary, Singapore. If a student were to spend two, three, or four years or more in our midst and never understand our Baptist heritage, this would be quite regrettable.

Why do I speak like this? It is because this Baptist faith background is very precious and meaningful. During this lecture, I hope to share a bit why our Baptist heritage is a blessing.

However, first I want to say very clearly, my purpose is not necessarily to convince others to become Baptists. Even though Lee Kuan Yew may have believed that Americans are always trying to make other people just like us, I think Baptists can honestly say that we simply want to obey God's word and encourage others to follow Jesus according to biblical teaching. As we carry out our ministries, if more people follow Jesus and—as John 5:24 says—cross over from death to life, we are pleased with that outcome.

Next, my purpose is also not to criticize non-Baptist Christians. Actually, I appreciate the faithful service of Christians of every denomination. To give a few examples: first, Paul van Imschoot. He was a twentieth-century Flemish Catholic priest. His valuable Old Testament Theology is in our library. Second, Martin Luther. He is truly one of the most important people in the history of the world, because he advocated that God's authority is higher than every human organization, including governments and churches. Third, Charles Wesley. He wrote over 6,000 hymns, including my favorite one, "And Can it Be?" Fourth, N.T. Wright. He urges the church to recover and emphasize the extremely important doctrine of the resurrection. I definitely appreciate the contributions of these Christians.

Now, on the screen are a Catholic, a Lutheran, a Methodist, and an Anglican. What about Presbyterians? Of course, I appreciate my Presbyterian colleagues! I think that working with other denominations to the greatest extent possible is the best way to do ministry.

In fact, trans-denominational ministry is my normal practice. Perhaps you remember my former ministry as a Navy chaplain. When I was on an aircraft carrier performing baptisms, my co-baptizer was a Methodist. What's more, you are definitely familiar with my present calling: to serve the non-denominational church in China through BTS.

So, if I don't necessarily plan to convince you to become Baptists, and I won't be criticizing believers of other denominations, and I approve of working with believers of other denominations

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to the greatest possible extent, then we can return to the recent question, “Why do we need to discuss such a sectarian topic?” More specifically we can ask, “Why is receiving a Baptist theological education a special blessing?” Answering this question is the task of my lecture.

On January 5, 1527, a prisoner was pulled out of his jail cell in Zurich, Switzerland. Several officials led him from the prison to the river’s edge. There stood his mother and brother, and also a priest. The priest and the officials boarded a boat with the prisoner, and the boat was rowed to the middle of the river. On the boat, the priest repeatedly implored the prisoner to repent of his crime. At the same time, from the riverbank the prisoner could hear his mother and brother urging him to stand firm in his faith, and not to repent even in the face of death.

The officials had the prisoner squat down and place his arms behind his knees, tightly binding him in this position. The prisoner said, “Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.” Then the officials tossed him into the water, and he quickly sank.

And what was this prisoner’s heinous crime? Why did he face execution? Why did he deserve such a cruel punishment? There was only one reason: he had been baptized by immersion.

At the start of the Protestant Reformation, Switzerland and several other European countries had broken free from the tyrannical rule of the Roman Catholic Church and its religious persecution. Yet now, fewer than ten years later, Reformer Ulrich Zwingli worked with the Zurich city council to enact a law. Within eight days, all citizens must go to churches to have their infants receive baptism. Later they passed a second law: receiving baptism by immersion as an adult was punishable by drowning. Their line of thinking was: “So you want to receive baptism by immersion? Fine. If that is what you want, then you can experience eternal immersion: death by baptism.”

Let’s remember, these Swiss people would all affirm that they were Christians. In this so-called Christian setting, a so-called Reformer approved using the coercive power of the government to murder other Christians, other Protestants!

Today you can go to Zurich and see this monument by the river’s edge. The German inscription commemorates Felix Manz and five other Anabaptist martyrs. It poetically states that they received drowning as their final baptism. Google Street View lets us see this place by the river.

The story of Felix Manz and the other martyrs causes us to remember that in church history, the fine points of theology are very important. In fact, the fine points of theology were a matter of life and death. Even now, some believers in Muslim and atheist countries who receive baptism face serious consequences, including death.

Now if you have studied church history, you know that King Henry VIII in 1534 established himself as the supreme leader of the Church of England. His daughter Queen Elizabeth forced every English person to go to church and use the Book of Common Prayer to worship. Therefore in order to worship God, one must go to a government-approved place, submit to government-approved ministers, and use government-approved means of worship. All other worship acts were illegal.

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Penalties included imprisonment and worse. Does anyone think this sounds a bit familiar? Ecclesiastes fittingly says, “There is nothing new under the sun.”

Facing persecution from the English government, about the year 1600 a group of dissenters left England for Holland. In 1609 in Amsterdam, an Anglican priest named John Smyth decided that the Bible taught that after coming to faith in Christ, people should receive believer’s baptism by immersion. Therefore infant baptism was against biblical teaching. Although Smyth was not the first person to recover believer’s baptism by immersion, due to this “shocking” doctrine, opponents later gave the movement Smyth founded the name “Baptist.” By the way, I can tell you that when my family and I visited Amsterdam in 2009, unfortunately we could not find any commemoration of the 400-year history of Baptists.

Well anyway, of course, Baptist doctrines do not just have to do with believer’s baptism by immersion, so now I’d like to pause narrating the story of Baptist history in order to take this opportunity to discuss Baptist beliefs. So what are Baptist distinctives, and why should we care?

First: Baptist distinctives. I will list and explain eight doctrines. However, before discussing these doctrines, I want to share my personal perspective on Baptist beliefs. Having been a Baptist Christian for over thirty years, I have had the opportunity to consider the basis of these beliefs. In my opinion, there is a Baptist “heart,” and at the center of this heart is this simple idea: trust God.

This is not to say that other Christians do not trust God. My meaning is just that at the center of the Baptist heart is this motivation, this purpose of trusting God. The eight Baptist distinctives arise from trusting God. By discussing these distinctives, I plan to justify why this “Baptist heart” is so important.

This concept leads me to bring up the first doctrine. The most important of all Baptist beliefs is biblical authority. What is biblical authority? Since the Bible is God’s word, we accept the entire Bible in its Old and New Testaments. There is no higher human authority, including ourselves. Therefore our own thinking, our own preferences, our own traditions, and our own plans for our lives are completely without meaning when compared with biblical teaching.

In a manner of speaking, the foundation of every Baptist belief is biblical authority. If we truly believe the Bible is God’s word, biblical teaching has the authority of God. Therefore, every other doctrine stands under biblical authority. In order to see God’s will clearly, we must put on “Bible glasses,” then establish our theology and worldview.

The foundational disposition that only the Bible has authority causes Baptists to reject creedalism. That is to say, Baptist Christians reject the authority of all creeds. Perhaps we are all familiar with the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary . . .” and so forth. Is there any problem with these theological concepts? No. Throughout history, all orthodox Christians have believed these things. Maybe your non-Baptist church recites the Apostle’s Creed every week.

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However, even though Baptist Christians support these kinds of orthodox Christian expressions, we also essentially oppose using these statements as creeds. Why is this? It is because of the definition of a creed. In other words, every Christian must believe a creed, so the creed and the Bible have the same kind of authority. This line of thinking is absolutely unacceptable, because it raises the creed to the level of importance of God's word.

Creeds are human expressions and are not from God. Therefore creeds can contain error. For example, the traditional version of the Apostle's Creed says that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and buried; he descended into hell." Oh really? What support does this kind of statement have from the Bible? None.

Now let me proclaim truth. 1 Peter 3:18-19 says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits." Now what in the world does this Scripture from Peter mean? I'm not too sure, and systematic theologians cannot agree among themselves. Yet I do know for sure that the Apostle's Creed puts forth a single narrow interpretation: Jesus went to hell. This sort of interpretation brings up many theological contradictions, so more modern versions change the creed and use a euphemism to say that Jesus "descended to the grave."

This change raises a problem: authoritative Christian teaching has changed. Even worse, now some churches authoritatively say that Jesus went to hell, and other churches authoritatively say that he went to a certain non-specified place. Baptist Christians say, in order to avoid this kind of problem, churches should reject creeds, and just use the Bible to form their theology.

The result is, Baptist churches reject creeds and instead use confessions. No Baptist church member, seminary student, or pastor must agree with these confessions, because only the Bible has authority. There is only one sort-of exception. Southern Baptists use their confession as an accountability system for their seminary professors and missionaries. Since 16 million Southern Baptists support them, they want to know what they will teach. Their teaching must be in accordance with "The Baptist Faith and Message," their confession. If you are interested I can send it to you, including a Chinese translation. As you read this confession, I think you will find that it is full of biblical theology and Scripture citations. This emphasizes that Baptists are people who believe that only the Bible has authority.

Now biblical authority has many other implications, including the other Baptist distinctives. For now I only want to bring up two more fruits of the concept of biblical authority. First, the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism is not a specifically Baptist controversy. That is to say, from the beginning of the history of the Baptist movement, there have been both more reformed and less reformed Baptist churches. To discuss this problem in detail requires more time, so that is a lecture for another day.

Lastly, the implications of biblical authority include: church tradition can be wrong, and should change. I can share with you that many years ago in my home church, my ministry mentor had me come to his office. He said that a church member called him on the phone. Since she had a very

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serious medical condition, she asked him to have the elders of the church come, anoint her with oil and pray for her.

My mentor said to me that had been a Baptist minister for more than fifty years, and had never before received this kind of request. Furthermore he had never heard of other Baptist ministers receiving a request to anoint someone with oil. So as far as he was concerned, this was not a Baptist tradition. However, he told me that he opened his Bible to James 5:14-15. The Bible says, “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.”

In the end my mentor did not care what Baptist tradition or his own customs of ministry would have him do. That church member’s request was in accordance with biblical teaching, so that day we anointed her with oil and prayed for her. Why? Because only the Bible has authority.

OK. Now we return to Baptist distinctives. We have already said that the most important one is biblical authority, because this concept is the foundation for all the others.

The second distinctive is “autonomy of the local church.” That is to say, every Baptist church is an independent church. There is no higher human authority. The highest authority is God, expressed through his word. Why do Baptists believe this? Because in the Bible, there is no authority higher than the church other than the apostles. Since after the first century there have been no apostles, there is no need to create an authority to substitute for the apostles, in that no one has the qualifications of apostles (namely, receiving their apostolic commission directly from Jesus).

So the next time a person says, “I’m non-denominational. I’m a member of an independent church,” you can respond, “Great! I’m also a member of an independent church. I am a Baptist!”

The third distinctive is the “priesthood of all believers,” a very important concept of the Reformation. Baptists take 1 Timothy 2:5 seriously as it says, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” This Scripture opposes the Catholic doctrine that Mary is co-mediator. However, since there is only one mediator, the teaching of this Scripture passage is not only that there is no other mediator in heaven, but also there is none other on earth. Unlike the Old Testament people of Israel, now there is no need of priests to act as mediators between God and his people.

1 Peter 2:9 says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers requires that God’s people perform their duty to be a holy nation and submit to God’s leading in every situation according to God’s word. The implications of the priesthood of all believers also include congregational polity, which is to say that every believer participates in the governing of the church. Of course congregational polity leads to conflict in the church, because believers may not agree about the best road ahead for the church. However, as Peter said, these are “priests,” not autonomous mini-dictators. Priests should be God’s people, continually submitting to his leading.

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The fourth distinctive is “two ordinances.” The two ordinances are believer’s baptism by immersion and the Lord’s Supper. It is very important to define the meaning of “ordinance.” These ordinances are not ceremonies that make people holy, but holy ceremonies. This distinction is important. The concept that ceremonies make people holy is sacramentalism. Sacramentalism affirms that God transmits his grace to people through sacraments. That is to say, in order to receive certain types of grace, one must participate in sacraments. Conversely, if one does not participate in sacraments, one cannot receive certain types of grace.

Sacramentalism as a systematic theology concept just faces one little problem: it lacks biblical support. God himself uses the Holy Spirit to communicate his grace to people directly. 2 Peter 1:3 says, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.” God himself should be the satisfaction of believers. Because of the redemption Jesus brings and the Holy Spirit living within believers, Christians already have everything they need, which is to say, we have God himself.

The Bible opposes sacramentalism, including a concept close to sacramentalism: that in order to ensure that a person has truly received God’s grace, he or she must speak in tongues. According to the word of God, this idea is fundamentally wrong. No disciple of Jesus needs a specific ceremony or experience in order to receive God’s mercy and live out a Spirit-filled Christian life. Now with regard to baptism and the Lord’s Supper, if sacramentalism is incorrect, what is the correct perspective?

Since the Bible emphasizes ordinances, we dare not take believer’s baptism by immersion and the Lord’s Supper lightly. In fact, opposing infant baptism and forms of baptism other than believer’s baptism by immersion is due to Baptists taking biblical teaching seriously.

Why do I say this? There are at least three reasons. First, according to *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), the literal meaning of the “baptize” word is “to put or go under water,” that is to say, “to immerse.” Now someone might especially focus upon the ceremonial sense, saying that the “baptize” word is a ceremonial term; the literal meaning is not important.

Actually, evidence from ancient Greek opposes this. Before the Christian movement, this word’s literal meaning was “immerse.” The Septuagint used this word for the action that Elisha commanded Naaman to take: to dip himself seven times in the Jordan. Then did the early church suddenly change the meaning of the “baptize” word?

They did not. Let’s refer to the *Didache*, a first century catechism. This section contains instructions for baptism. Blue highlights the noun and participle forms of baptism and red highlights the verb forms. Verse 3 explains, if there is not enough water to carry out immersion baptisms, you can pour water instead. The “pouring” verb is in the red rectangle. As for baptism, the importance of these terms is that the early church was completely sure that the literal meaning was “immersion baptism,” that is to say, the meaning of the “baptism” verb was limited to “immersion baptism.” If one could not conduct an immersion baptism, it was necessary to use another word to express the mode of baptism: in this case, pouring. OK, to review, we have found

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that the “baptize” word in the Greek of Bible times always means “immersion baptism.” Since Baptists take biblical authority seriously, this reason is enough. The Bible’s teaching is that in order to baptize, one must put the believer’s body under the surface of the water.

Next there is the second reason for rejecting infant baptism. This reason has to do with the metaphorical meaning of baptism in the Bible. John the Baptist said in Mark 1:8, “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Matthew and Mark add “baptize you with fire.” Another metaphorical use is in Galatians 3:27, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” This is the idea of putting on clothes. Whether using the Holy Spirit, fire, or Christ, baptism metaphors use the imagery of completeness, including perhaps the most dramatic metaphor: that of a burial.

This “burial” is the third reason why we must perform immersion baptisms. Why do I say this? According to the Bible, ordinances are acted-out sermons. About baptism, Romans 6:4 says, “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” Therefore, immersion first symbolizes Jesus’s death. He was nailed to the cross and died because of the sins of all people. Then his body was placed in the grave, under the ground. We know that he resurrected three days later. The meaning of Jesus’s resurrection includes that he defeated the power of death that sin brings. Believer’s baptism by immersion first proclaims this truth about the past.

Next, immersion baptism proclaims a present truth. The Bible says that through faith, a person receives the salvation that Jesus brings. At that time, the “old self” dies. Immersion baptism is this old self’s burial service, and going under the water symbolizes the old self’s placement in the grave. Now even though at that point the burial is complete, there is yet still a resurrection! When coming up out of the water, a believer’s immersion baptism symbolizes the new self’s resurrection. Why does a “new self” have a resurrection? It is because the old self has already died and remains in the grave, never to return. Immersion baptism proclaims that now, through faith, a new self’s redeemed, eternal life with God has already begun.

We have already seen that immersion baptism proclaims truth about the past and the present: Jesus and the believer have experienced resurrection. Lastly, immersion baptism also proclaims a future-oriented message. In the future when God creates the new heavens and new earth, due to God’s grace and the salvation Jesus brings, every disciple of Jesus will resurrect and live together with the Lord forever.

Simply put, what message does immersion baptism preach? It preaches the gospel. The story of the last baptism on the aircraft carrier helps me explain my meaning. There was a sailor who had grown up in church. After witnessing others’ baptisms, he realized that he had not yet truly trusted Christ himself and had not yet surrendered himself to Jesus. After he decided to follow Jesus, his atheist coworkers started making fun of him. Despite their teasing, he still invited them to his baptism. In this video, these atheist coworkers are in the background. Let me show you.

Later, this baptized sailor told me an interesting story. He said that after the baptism, his coworkers stopped criticizing him. Why was that? They told him that seeing his baptism changed their

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attitude and made them understand that the changes in the sailor's life were really from God and were God's doing. Baptism preached the gospel through that sailor's life.

Now I know that in this room there may be some who have not received believer's baptism by immersion. I don't want to embarrass you, but I must tell you that according to the Bible, immersion baptism is very important. Getting baptized is the most foundational step in following Jesus. Baptism is so important that it is in the Great Commission! Even church planting is not a direct action of obedience to the Great Commission.

Now, if you have not received believer's baptism by immersion, what should you do? Well, thankfully, this is a Baptist seminary, right? In the Bible there is John the Baptist. I'm Scott the Baptist! Let me or other Baptists help you hold a funeral for your old self and celebrate your redeemed life in Christ!

OK, other than immersion baptism, the ordinances also include the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is also full of significance, and also proclaims the gospel. You know that every component of the Jewish Passover meal symbolizes God's salvation of his people. Jesus inserted himself into this symbolic ceremony. Every time believers eat and drink the Lord's Supper, we remember that Jesus is God's salvation.

Now I need to bring up the next Baptist distinctive: individual soul liberty (freedom of conscience). This concept is that every person must personally decide to follow Jesus. When standing before God, no one can depend on someone else's faith. Logically speaking, since every person can choose to follow Jesus, everyone can also choose not to do so. This is the essence of religious freedom. In church history, Baptists were the first to support religious freedom.

The achievement of "inventing" religious freedom is praiseworthy, but we need to remember that even though normally the abstract concept of freedom is good, we should pay attention to the Bible's explanation of freedom. Romans 6:18 says, "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness." Believers are free, therefore we submit to God's leading according to the teaching of the Bible.

This definition according to the Bible is important. In our library are two books with the same title: *Why I Am A Baptist*. Even though they have an identical title, these two books have absolutely differing content. When reading these two books, the reader soon finds out what the authors believe the essence of being a Baptist is. The authors of one of the books believe that the abstract concept of "freedom" is at the center of the Baptist identity. The authors of the other book believe that "biblical authority" is instead most important. The result is predictable. Those who especially value freedom are liberals, and those who especially value biblical authority are evangelicals. I hope that today's lecture will help you decide what kind of Baptist you want to be. As far as I am concerned, I say with Joshua, "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

The next Baptist distinctive is "saved and baptized church membership." We already know the connection between salvation and baptism is that baptism proclaims the gospel and symbolizes a baptized person's participation in the gospel story. There are two reasons that a church member

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must satisfy these two requirements. First, an unredeemed person is not a Christian and is not in covenant relationship with God, and so is not part of the covenant community. Second, we can consider why salvation alone is insufficient to become a church member. Receiving immersion baptism is not an insignificant requirement. When someone refuses believer's baptism by immersion, that person rejects the message of baptism. Why would this type of person want to become a church member? Is he or she really a Christian?

OK, the next distinctive is "two offices," which are pastor and deacon. The Bible also uses other Greek words, including bishop and elder. However, it looks like these are synonyms and do not designate other church offices, especially offices with higher authority than that of the local church.

Lastly I want to share with you about the concept of "separation of church and state." This is related to individual soul liberty (freedom of conscience), because Baptists also invented the idea of separation of church and state. Why do I say this? We have already brought up the fact that at the time of the Protestant Reformation, Protestants escaped from the persecution of the Roman Catholic Church. Then, so-called Protestants immediately began using the power of the state to persecute others! At last Baptists broke this cycle. The colony of Rhode Island in North America was founded by Baptists. This was the first place in the world where government and religion were separate. No one faced religious persecution there.

Church history shows that whenever the government controls the church or the church controls the government, the consequences for the church are very bad. In theory, in England the government and the Anglican church have an intimate and friendly relationship. However, modern Western culture demands that the church support homosexuality. Parliament has the authority to force the church to change, so the Anglican church is just one vote away from having to leave biblical foundations in order to comply with the demands of the government. This is insanity. No one has higher authority than the Bible, including Christians. This is why my perspective is that trusting God is at the center of the Baptist heart, and biblical authority is the most important Baptist distinctive. Every other distinctive derives from this concept, this attitude. We must trust God.

By the way, has anyone noticed something clever that someone did (not me) while arranging these Baptist beliefs in a sequence? If you use these terms on the screen, you can form a handy acronym (BAPTISTS).

OK, now that we have finished discussion of Baptist distinctives, we should ask a critical thinking question. Is biblical authority really this important? Maybe this is just an argument over terminology in a Western cultural context, and there is no application in an Asian context. About this issue, perhaps we should apply 2 Timothy 2:14: "Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen." Do you think this is the case? Let me show you this video.

Biblical authority absolutely is extremely important. Eastern Lightning (the Almighty God Church), like all cults and heretical groups, knows that their number one enemy is God's word. In

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the video, later this man goes to a meeting, and there abandons the truth of the Bible to take up lies. Why is this? It is because of his shallow Bible training.

My brothers and sisters, not every Christian should go to seminary to receive high-level theological education, such as the program here at BTS. However, as far as church leaders are concerned, familiarity with all that God has spoken is exceedingly precious. We say with the psalmist to God, “The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.” If we truly agree, then we also agree with our Baptist heritage. Now, I’d like to ask just one more time, “Why is it a special blessing to receive a Baptist theological education?” It is because we are “Bible only, Jesus always” people. We trust God.

We began this lecture with prayer. Now let’s end it by praising our faithful God. Let’s stand and sing this Baptist hymn.

Sing “Worthy of Worship.”

Amen!