The name Baptist began as a derisive nickname, first appearing as Anabaptist, or “rebaptizer.” This group was called such, because they denied the validity of the traditional baptism, which usually took place in infancy. As infant baptism became less prevalent and as alternative modes of worship grew more widespread, the still young denomination adopted the shortened form of “Baptist.” (New England churches show a gradual progression from simply “the Church of Christ” to “the Church of Christ in Gospel Order” to “the Church of Christ Baptisted Upon Profession of Their Faith” to the “Baptized Church of Christ” to, finally the Baptist Church.) The most glaring liturgical innovation of this politically powerless, socially suspect group was the new subject of the baptism (namely the adult). The other feature of the early Baptist movement that most alarmed contemporaries was the Baptists’ novel notion that civil government had no responsibility, and indeed no right to enforce a religious conformity.

Modern Baptists do not really derive from the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. (Modern Mennonites may be more accurately said to be the lineal descendants of those radical reformers). English and American Baptists, who in the Twentieth century make up 90 percent of all Baptists in the world, emerged from the Puritan agitations of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Enemies of the fledgling Baptist churches used the term Anabaptist to dredge up fears about these English Separatists. They calculated that this name would have bring to the mind of all who believed in a well ordered society, every reminder of fanaticism and antinomianism of the bloodiest days of the Reformation.

The early Baptists shared many of the Puritan concerns about a Church of England still too “papist,” still too engrossed with civil enforcement and ecclesiastical prelature. These separating Puritans early on distinguished themselves by insisting that the church be a voluntary society. Two critical components of this voluntarism are 1) the insistence that members choose their church rather than be born into it; this voluntary act was testified to by the act of baptism, and 2) the conviction that the covenant of believers to work and worship together was a private agreement with which the state had nothing to do, for conscience must be left free.

Under the leadership of Thomas Helwys, John Smyth, and John Murton, the English “General Baptists” (non-Calvinist, affirming an unrestricted or general atonement for mankind) grew from a small, scarcely visible group of believers in 1609, to around twenty thousand members by 1660. However, the major strength of the modern Baptist churches was to come from a somewhat later development of the 1630’s: the rise of the Particular Baptists, who affirmed a limited or particular redemption for mankind. These Calvinist Baptists grew under the leadership of John Spilsbury from one church in London in 1633 to, within a decade, seven churches. The Particular Baptists introduced the ancient Christian practice of baptism by immersion. One of Spilsbury’s group, Mark Lucar, emigrated to America sometime before 1648. He settled in Newport, Rhode Island, where he introduced the “new baptism” to New England’s scattered Anabaptists, as they were still being called.

Baptist growth in America lagged behind that of England in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Roger Williams gave the infant denomination both a geographical base and a theological thrust when in 1636, as an exile from the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony, he established Providence, Rhode Island as a colony that was open to all kinds of religious outcasts: Baptists, Quakers, Ranters, Fifth Monarchists, Gortonists, and many others. However, only in a limited sense did Rhode Island become a Baptist stronghold. By the end of the seventeenth century, Quakers dominated the colony politically, and the Baptists had split into Calvinist, Arminian, and Seventh Day factions. In Newport, on the other hand, the leadership of Dr. John Clarke gave the infant denomination a firm if tiny base in the New World.

The great growth of Baptists in North America followed the eighteenth century’s Great Awakening. Although the Baptists were not the prime leaders in the movement, they were its prime beneficiaries. Churches which separated from the Congregational establishments in New England often became “Separatists” and then later became Baptists. Also, up until the Revolutionary War, the Church of England had enjoyed a legal monopoly in the South. Baptists seized upon the discomfort of a church so swiftly disestablished and so widely under suspicion to make major conquests among farmers, artisans, and even gentry.

After the American Revolution, Baptists also made phenomenal advances among the nation’s blacks because of their persuasive preaching style, accessible theology, appealing baptismal ritual, and ecclesiology that granted freedom from white rule. By the mid-twentieth century, approximately two-thirds of America’s black Christians were Baptists.
The pattern of increasing diversity had been set by the white Baptists. Some Baptists, disturbed by the prevailing Calvinist orientation of their denominations, chose to emphasize man’s free will; they were known as Free Will Baptists. Others resisted the creation of national societies and boards, afraid that Baptists would aspire to national status with all the evils that bureaucracy and hierarchy implied; these remained in small, local, nearly autonomous units. In the conflict over slavery, white Baptists split along geographical lines in 1845, and the Southern Baptist Convention was organized in Augusta, Georgia. This Convention has spread to become the largest single Baptist entity in the world. By the mid-twentieth century it had also become the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. The Northern Baptist Convention (now the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A.) did not fare as well, facing constant separations and schisms—most of them related to the conflicts between the modernists and fundamentalists. As a consequence, by the late twentieth century the Southern Baptist convention outnumbered its northern counterpart by about ten to one. Although other groups that divided over slavery have reunited — the Methodists in 1939 and the Presbyterians in 1983 — the Baptists have shown little sign of reuniting.

In the early 1980's, the northern and southern “halves” had an aggregate membership of around fifteen million. The two oldest black denominations have a combined membership of eight to ten million. This leaves approximately four to five million Baptists in America who are widely scattered in other organizations. Most Baptist groups affirm a strict congregational polity (denying any national or central organization), a rigid biblical theology, and their own special hold on “the faith once delivered to the saints” (opposing any ecumenical ventures).

Outside the United States, the Baptist churches are unevenly and often sparsely scattered. Estimates of membership are: Africa and Europe, about one million in each area; in Asia, about 1.5 million; in Central and South America, something less than one million; in Canada, between one and two hundred thousand Baptists. In the Soviet Union, the Baptist presence is highly visible and highly vulnerable; Baptists entered Russia from several points of departure in the late nineteenth century to encounter severe opposition from the czars and Russian Orthodox Church. That opposition has intensified as Baptists, true to an ancient heritage, have found any interference or regulation by the state intolerable. In England, the General Baptists merged with the Universalists. The Calvinist British Baptists in the 1980s numbered about one-hundred thousand.

German Baptists received the nickname of Dunkers, or Dunks because of their belief in a threefold immersion. Known officially as the Church of the Brethren since 1908, they emigrated virtually en masse to America.

Although Baptist churches have multiplied in variety nearly as much as in number, it is possible to point to several broad features generally characteristic of the entire group. (1) Voluntarism. Membership is by choice; creeds are to emerge from below, not be handed down from above; worship follows no fixed form, without service books or a canon of prayers. Voluntarism has its weaker side in becoming the passive reflection of a surrounding culture, in surrendering slowly and unthinkingly to what one author has called the “cultural captivity of the churches.” (2) Pietism. This characteristic places its first priority on the personal and direct encounter with God. Pietism ensures a zeal; it does not always carry with it a corresponding bounty of knowledge and public responsibility. (3) Evangelism. In some times and places evangelism has been seen as the totality of the Baptist effort. Special classes and techniques in “soul winning” have developed, and the “revival meeting” became standard fare in most Baptist churches. (4) Sectarianism. This characteristic has kept most Baptists on the fringes of the ecumenical movement. A mid-nineteenth-century movement known as Landmarkism represents the sectarian extreme; it held that true Baptist churches have existed from the apostolic age to the present, and only the true local church has a valid ministry, valid sacraments, and biblical authenticity. The American Baptist Association, with about one million members in the 1980s, constitutes the contemporary manifestation of a sectarianism that rejects all ecumenical endeavors, is strongly suspicious of Roman Catholicism, and deeply resents those Baptist churches that behave in a more “denominational” way.