

the membership.

All Baptist distinctives derive from the Scriptures, predominantly the New Testament. Any given church is therefore a New Testament or Gospel church to the extent that it conforms to the New Testament; conversely, to the extent that any given church departs from the New Testament, to that extent it ceases to be a New Testament or Gospel church.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Heb. 5:5-6; 6:20; 7:1-25 for the perpetuity or everlasting nature of the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Cf. esp. 7:23-25. “unchangeable” is ἀπαράβατον, lit: “inviolable, un-trespassable.” No Romish, Mormon, Jewish or Protestant priest can trespass upon the priesthood which our Lord holds.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix III, W. R. Downing, *The New Testament Church*, (Morgan Hill, CA: PIRS Publications, Revised 2006), pages 274-275.

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# BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES

There are several great Baptist distinctives which characterize the biblical and historic Baptist position. These major distinctives include:

**First, the Scriptures as the only and all-sufficient rule of both faith and practice.** This stands in contrast to other historic criteria such as religious tradition, ecclesiastical authority, creeds, church councils, rationalism and modern religious irrationalism which stresses subjective experience and emotionalism.

**Second, salvation by grace alone.** Salvation by grace implies: that salvation must be scripturally viewed in the context of the eternal, infallible redemptive purpose of God (Rom. 8:28-31; Eph. 1:3-14) and that grace is unmerited favor in the place or stead of merited wrath. Grace and works or human ability cannot be commingled (Rom. 9:6-24; 11:5-6; Eph. 2:4-5, 8-10). Grace is more than a principle. It is at once *a principle-as* opposed to works or human ability, *a prerogative--God* freely and sovereignly bestows this grace on whom he will, according to his eternal, infallible purpose; and *a power-which* enables the sinner to freely and effectively lay hold of Christ by faith (Phil. 1:29); Regeneration or the "new birth" precedes faith and repentance (Jn. 3:3, 5-8; Acts 16:14; Jas. 1:18); Gospel holiness and righteousness are necessary characteristics of experimental salvation and Christian experience (Rom. 6:1

-23; Eph. 1:3-6; 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-10; 1 Thess. 1:3-5).

**Third, *believer's baptism by immersion.*** This Baptist distinctive derives from the truth of the New Testament as to both mode-immersion, and subjects-believers. There is no record of the immersion or sprinkling of infants, or the intentional baptism of unbelievers in the New Testament. On this New Testament distinctive, the Baptists stand in opposition to both Western and Eastern Catholicism, and traditional Protestantism. We can change neither the mode nor the subjects without altogether changing the significance of the ordinance.

**Fourth, *a regenerate church membership.*** This is distinctive of a true New Testament or Gospel church, and necessarily implies:

- That church membership is voluntary. A church that practices the immersion or sprinkling of infants and considers the church to be composed of both believers and their children is largely involuntary in membership and alien to the New Testament.
- That the membership is bound by a common personal faith and saving interest in the Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (Acts 2:41-42, 47).

**Fifth, *the priesthood of the individual believer.*** In the context of the New Covenant and New Testament, there is no priest-cult or sacerdotal mediator between the individual believer and his Lord. Every believer is a “king-priest,” and has immediate access to God through the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1-3; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 4:13-10:18; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6).<sup>1</sup> The priesthood of the individual believer stands in the closest relationship to soul-liberty or freedom of conscience.

**Sixth, *the autonomy of the local assembly un-***

*der the Lordship of Jesus Christ.* The autonomy, or self-governing nature of each local body of Christ, presupposes four realities:

- The terms *Pastor, Elder, and Bishop* all designate the same office in the local assembly. There is no ecclesiastical hierarchy, or church office that exists apart from or beyond that of the local assembly.
- The New Testament does not teach an “Apostolic Succession,” therefore Baptists do not recognize any authority above the local assembly, except that of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and his inscripturated Word. Matthias replaced Judas to fulfill the prophetic Scripture (Acts 1:15-26), but no one ever succeeded the original Apostles of the New Testament era into that office.
- There is no extra-biblical authority that rules beyond the local assembly, such as presbyteries, councils, synods, denominational conventions, national churches or associations.
- The so-called “First Church Council” held at Jerusalem in Acts 15, although attended by the inspired Apostles, was actually a *conference* between two local churches and possessed no authority beyond the agreement of the Apostles who attended.

**Seventh, *soul Liberty or freedom of conscience.*** Only the Word of God can command the conscience of the Believer. It is foreign to the teaching of the New Testament to bind the conscience by religious tradition, ecclesiastical decree, denominational standards; or attempt to enforce religious convictions by means of the civil authorities. Church discipline, or exclusion from membership and its privileges, is the extremity of church action. Further, this is not done by degrees, but by a definitive act of