

# BAPTIST FEATURES

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## HOW TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN NEW TESTAMENT ESSENTIALS AND BAPTIST CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

BY: H. H. Hobbs

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fifth in a series of ten articles discussing some of the problems of Southern Baptist life. The opinions of Dr. Hobbs are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor.

It is a dangerous thing to meddle with tradition. Jesus was crucified for so doing. The Roman Catholic openly admits that his religious faith is based upon the Scriptures and tradition---and that to him tradition is more sacred. Many Baptists, without admitting it, follow the same course. It is well that we distinguish between that which is essentially New Testament teaching and that which is custom or tradition.

Tradition may be either good or bad. The word is used in both senses in the New Testament (cf. Matt. 15:2ff.; Gal. 1:14; Col. 2:8; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6.) It may be based upon scriptural authority or it may not be. A tradition or custom is not true because it is old; neither is it false because it is of recent origin.

For the Baptist there is but one question--"What saith the scriptures?" No one has ever stated it better than Dr. B. H. Carroll when in effect he said that the New Testament is all the law of Christianity; all the New Testament always will be all the law of Christianity. Thus for the Baptist the New Testament is our sufficient rule of faith and practice. In that light we would suggest two simple rules by which to distinguish between New Testament essentials and Baptist customs and traditions.

In the first place, does the New Testament teach it? For example, take the office of deacon. In our modern churches the board of deacons is an authoritative body looked upon as such by the local church, many pastors, and especially themselves. But "what saith the scriptures?" The office of deacon is set forth, though not named, in Acts 6. Here it is simply a position of service in assisting the apostles. When the office is named (Phil.1:1) the term chosen is that of a servant. Furthermore, when the qualifications for the office are set forth (1 Tim. 3) nothing is said about authority. Indeed an examination of 1 Tim. 3:4f. and verse 12 will reveal that the responsibility for the welfare of the church rests not upon the deacon but upon the pastor as overseer (bishop). The deacon is the helper not the director. Here tradition is definitely out of line with the New

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Testament teaching.

In the second place, does all the New Testament teach it? Baptists have often utilized this principle in answering those who do not agree with us on matters of doctrine. Why not try it on ourselves?

At the risk of being tarred and feathered--take an example. The traditional position (some say that it goes back only to the J. R. Graves period) on baptism is a case in point. We may classify our belief as to the form and meaning of baptism as a traditional belief in the good sense of the word--based securely upon the teachings of the New Testament. But for some there is an Achilles heel when we cross over into the realm of authority. The usual order is proper subject, proper mode, proper administrator and proper authority, the last referring to a New Testament church. The first three will, we believe, withstand the scrutiny of the Scripture. But what about the words proper authority? I realize that I am treading on sacred soil for all Baptists. But--"what saith the scriptures?" An examination of Acts 8 and 10 will reveal that both Philip and Peter baptized without the candidates having been approved by a local church. If we contend, as some do, that the Jerusalem church had authorized them to baptize whomsoever they should win--the New Testament fails to record it. Some insist that the Jerusalem church reviewed (Acts 8:14ff.; 11:1-18) the baptisms in question, but it seems clear that the issue under review was not baptism but whether or not a Gentile could be saved without first becoming a Jewish proselyte. (Before some Baptist brother heats up his tar let me hasten to say that I have never baptized anyone who had not first been approved for baptism by the local church; nor do I accept alien immersion.) But -we should recognize that this position regarding authority is tradition that trembles in the face of these scriptural references.

A good practice for all Baptists would be to follow the example of the Bereans who when they heard even the Apostle Paul "received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11).

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