

Faith Pulpit

The Unnoticed Baptist Distinctive

Our recent Baptist literature has made a big point that we believe the Bible. In fact, the “B” in Baptist stands for the Bible. Historically we have believed that the Bible is the verbally inspired, inerrant Word of God. We also believe that God’s child should walk in obedience to its plain statements literally interpreted. Moreover, we will memorize passages of the Bible, thereby hiding it in our hearts. Of the four statements of faith that we have treasured in the last century and a half, all have said essentially these things. Indeed, as I leaf through Lumpkin’s¹ standard compilation of our confessions of faith, I find virtual unanimity that we have held the Scriptures in both Testaments to be the very Word of God and absolutely authoritative indeed.

Yet the framers of these confessions have somehow missed a key distinctive of our Baptist faith. This distinctive lies implicit in all their statements, yet I find not one of them spelling it out. The distinctive lies unnoticed, before their eyes, and often before ours. Reflection would seem to make this distinctive so obvious that we might marvel that our fathers so rarely phrased it in plain words.

Some did get close. Lumpkin quotes the Amsterdam Confession of 1611, Section 9, to the effect that Jesus is the mediator of the New Testament, which is our sole rule. On page 228 he quotes the Standard Confession of the General Baptists, 1660, that babies are not to be sprinkled, but that members are to be admitted by the New Testament way. What we see here barely mentioned is actually a principle that underlies our whole history, namely the principle of New Testament authority.

In other circles I have heard men teach this principle. Yet these men seem to be but few in number, and few appear to realize the importance of the truth we have accepted without naming it nor reflecting on it. It is the truth that while the whole Bible is verbally inspired and that the two Testaments harmonize perfectly, in any seeming conflict between the Old and New Testaments, in this age of graces it is the New Testament rule that prevails.

This insight lies behind all our historic confessions. This insight cuts us off from being either Protestants or Catholics. It in no way diminishes our view of inspiration. It most certainly does, however, clarify a principle that we have observed from our beginning: that if we would rightly divide the Word of Truth, we must distinguish between Israel and the Church. The rules for one are not the rules for the other. The Old Testament provides for a theocracy. The New Testament looks forward to the millennial theocracy, but in the meantime it teaches a brotherhood of believers.

The most obvious illustration of this principle, this basic Baptist distinctive, would seem to be in cases of heresy. Ask any group what the new Testament requires, and they will reply that we must reason with him and then if necessary put him out. Most of us might well agree that if we were found to hold false doctrine, we would prefer the church to deal with us according to the New Testament rule.

A bit of reflection would suggest that this does indeed inform our doctrine of the church. The church is not Israel, and those of us who are dispensational have already assented to this basic idea. We have accepted the principle that in any seeming conflict, we take the New Testament rule. Often we have accepted the corollary that Old Testament rules apply only to the extent that the New Testament repeats them.

We seem at most ordinations to ask if Baptists are Protestants. Whatever the reasons that we may get, the principle of New Testament authority would seem to explain why Baptists are not. Indeed, the principle undergirds each other distinctive that we hold.

1. We hold to the distinctive of soul liberty, an idea that the Protestants detested, an idea hardly to be found in the Old Testament, but, we hold, clearly implied in the New. If Calvin had held it, he would not have had Servetus burned. If Luther had held it, he might not have damned the Anabaptists. If the Puritans had held it they might not have persecuted dissent, and Massachusetts might not have hanged those Quakers nor put Baptists to the whip.

2. We hold to the distinctive of the autonomy of the local church. If the Old Testament were equally authoritative, we might well have to accept one central place of worship, whether Jerusalem, Valley Forge, Nashville, or Schaumburg. The autonomous local church appears only in the New Testament, and all hierarchies must draw on the Old Testament if they would base themselves on the Bible.

3. We hold to regenerate membership. The historic denominations accept the idea of a mixed membership, because most of their members are somehow brought in as infants. This may have a basis in the Old Testament, as babies were born into the covenant, but we look in vain to find a parallel in the New Testament, Israel may have been a mixed multitude; the church is not to be.

4. We hold to the separation of church and state. Israel had a state religion, as do both Catholic and Protestant traditions. The New Testament, however, knows only a deep separation between the church and state, and only the New Testament knows this separation.

5. We hold to believer's baptism. Those who would sprinkle babies may find bits and pieces of New Testament verses that they can bend to their view, but their real support has to come from Old Testament circumcision. Again our history reveals our hidden distinctive. The historic creeds seem not to have noticed it, but New Testament authority lay beneath this foundation Baptist principle of believer's baptism.

This would seem to be the time to enunciate what we have always held implicitly. It might simplify numbers of issues. It is true indeed that whole Bible is verbally and plenarily inspired and that it is infallible and inerrant in all matters of which it speaks. But we also hold, as did our fathers, that to the church and in this age of grace, in any seeming conflict between the two testaments, it is the New Testament rule that applies.

Works Cited

1. William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confession of Faith*. Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959.

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Dr. Robert Delnay (Th.D., Grace Theological Seminary) was a distinguished theologian, educator, and author whose ministry spanned over seven decades. A graduate of Wheaton College, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Grace Theological Seminary, Dr. Delnay served in numerous leadership and teaching roles, including at Faith Baptist Bible College, where he was a beloved professor known for his commitment to expository preaching and biblical scholarship.

A prolific author, he wrote several books and articles, leaving a lasting legacy of theological insight and pastoral wisdom. Dr. Delnay's deep love for God's Word and his dedication to training the next generation of Christian leaders impacted countless students and ministries worldwide. He went home to be with Christ in 2023.