

# Baptist Identity as a Project of the BWA Heritage and Identity Commission

## “Mapping a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Global Baptist Identity”

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### Introduction and Preliminaries

#### Baptist Identity

“Baptist identity” is now certainly a “growth industry” There are numerous books, articles and web-sites (<http://www.baptistdistinctives.org>) devoted to the topic. There is also plenty of evidence on the ground from churches and individuals that the traditional patterns are undergoing change and that there are questions and uncertainties about the situation.

As an example, let me mention that while preparing this paper I came across a Baptist church which asked its people to choose the colours of their clothing to match the liturgical colours of the season, and a national Baptist body which described its leader as the Primate. Then there is the common situation where the senior pastor will tell his people, “Just call me Bob – not Reverend or Pastor or even Mister”!

The situation is quite widespread ranging from churches not using the name Baptist in their title through to changes in structure and governance which seem to diminish congregational government and general lack of interest and support for denominational programs.

In short, we can raise questions such as this: after 400 years, are Baptists still the people we used to know, and, are they still needed on the Christian landscape as a separate identifiable body?

#### Baptist Identity and the BWA Heritage and Identity Commission

We are the Heritage and **Identity** Commission. In my experience we have done a good deal on the ‘Heritage’ but less on ‘Identity’. Samples of ‘Identity’ are the book *We Baptists* (1999) and the 1989 Identity Statement (see Appendix I – printed in the BWA’s *Faith Life and Witness* 1986-90 pp146-149 – it is now on our website at <http://www.bwa-baptist-heritage.org/HIC-ident.htm>), and perhaps others, implicitly and indirectly, if not deliberately.

(I did find these as well: FD Rees, “Baptist Identity – immersed through worship”, 2000-05, pp 151-165; also at <http://repository.mcd.edu.au/340/>; C Ellis, “Who are the Baptists – a study in worship”, 2000-05, pp 78-90)

We need to ask why the word “Identity” was added to our title. (The date seems to be about 2000 but this needs verifying.) Information received from Tony Cupit suggests that it was added because BWA officers travelling in certain areas of the world were often asked questions about the nature of Baptist Identity. So it was added to this Commission although I think we could say that other commissions also address the subject in various ways.

We also need to ask about the purpose and intentions behind such a change of name.

For example,

- a) what is expected of HIC (and BWA more broadly) by including this item in the charter – ie, what is the role of HIC in setting the lead for understanding and promoting Baptist Identity on a global scale,
- b) what would we expect to see as an outcome of our thinking and activities? – what would we do about it? What differences would be seen in the churches? What would it mean for BWA and our conventions/unions re programs, policies, relations with others

#### New approaches needed

The topic of Baptist Identity therefore is firmly in the court of this Commission and because of the current interest in it coupled with the multitudinous ways of handling it, it appears a new approach is needed to try to make some progress. In short, unless Baptists at 400+ years are sure of themselves, the future does not seem very bright; surely the BWA HIC has a role in helping to clarify the current confusing scene.

## Scope

We need to note the title of this paper which indicates the scope.

We are to look at the “global” scene, not just the local or parochial context of a given country or area; nor are we to look at a particular branch or a tradition of the Baptist family. We need instead to look at the broadest scope and take on the most comprehensive perspective we can.

Perhaps we may feel that this is too ambitious or that it might not filter down to the national or even local level very effectively. That may be so, but it need not be the case. Let me give you two examples from my area to show how the global can impact the local (even in the days before Twitter and Facebook!). In 1905, Rev AD Shaw drew upon the formation of the BWA in that year to inspire Baptists in the regional Queensland town of Rockhampton to celebrate the jubilee of Baptists in the state (as he did also the publication of the 50<sup>th</sup> volume of Spurgeon’s sermons (*Rockhampton Morning Bulletin* 11 Sept 1905). Earlier, in 1849, Rev Charles Stewart used the newly written doctrinal statement of the Evangelical Alliance which had been formulated in Birmingham where he had been a pastor at the time, as the basis for the innovative and somewhat daring United Evangelical Church which he established in Brisbane.

Note also that the title has the word “Mapping” – we are trying to look at what is happening and where people are in the process to discern directions and developments. It is not our job to dictate the orthodox position, but to try to see where people are heading and put them in touch with milestones and guideposts. This will mean a sensitive approach which tries to gather data from all over, to understand its importance and significance, and then to synthesise it with other data to come up with a picture of the whole that people can recognize, welcome and use.

## Methodology and approach

This paper is an initial survey of the scene which is not by nature definitive. It uses samples rather than exhaustive documentation, and is interactive, collaborative and open-ended. It is intended to make suggestions on how we might proceed, and concludes with a concrete proposal for this Commission.

I will be using local examples, results of an informal survey, traditional literature and hopefully some input from the audience.

This exercise should include not only ‘card carrying’ Baptist churches and conventions, but also peek over the fence at other baptistic groups as well, remembering that there is no copyright on the word “Baptist”, there is no franchising system and there are no quality control measures in place. (This of course is one of the factors that creates the problem of Baptist Identity!) The category of “baptistic” includes people who are happy to be known as Baptist but who sit loose to denominational ties and any historical legacy, as well as independent churches and others who share many of the traditional “Baptist distinctives” without being members of a particular convention.

## Minefield

I am aware that this topic is a minefield! And that it is very naïve to tackle it, given the variety of opinions and the passion it invokes. There is also the indifference of many who think it is not a question at all. Another mark of my naivety is my desire to avoid the politics of this topic which makes “Baptist Identity” just a tool to promote an organisation or leader or program or a weapon to punish others! For example, in finalising this paper I heard of changes to a church’s structure being introduced by the current pastor to break the monopoly of entrenched lay power centres that he found were neutralising his role.

So now, how do people approach Baptist Identity? I think there are broadly two ways, both of which have their value. But I think we can use third approach as well.

However, I hope that this presentation itself will be another way of tackling the subject, taking neither the traditional first way, or the more contemporary second way, or even my proposed new third way in opposition to each other, but all three in an integrated process that will produce helpful results.

## I Traditional approach to Baptist Distinctives

The traditional approach to the topic as found in well known books and articles is to appeal to “Baptist distinctives” (my spell checker does not like that use of the word!) We need to mention various examples and then discuss some of the ways in which these are used and reactions to them. This is a complex situation! (I was interested to discover after having prepared the essence of this paper that Mark Arkapaw of Sydney NSW has also been interested in the approach I have adopted in this section; see his, “What Have Baptists Said About Baptist Identity” in *The Lever*, Issue 3 Spring 2008 pp 3-7  
[http://bet.org.au/media/files/Lever\\_3\\_2008.pdf](http://bet.org.au/media/files/Lever_3_2008.pdf)

## Definite lists of theological principles

There are numerous examples of these principles – summed up by the mnemonic, B.A.P.T.I.S.T. (Believer's baptism, Autonomy of the local church, Priesthood of all believers, Two officers of pastor and deacon, Independent soul liberty, saved and regenerate church membership, Two ordinances of baptism and Lord's Supper). We can use this as a shorthand for lists of distinctives.

Other examples could be mentioned including EY Mullins' famous soul competency under God and his six "Axioms of Religion", Brian Haymes' - nine point system in *Baptist Basics* (Lordship of Christ, Church as a Gathering company of believers, churches associating together, Believers' baptism, the authority of the Bible, the significance of the church meeting, the priesthood of all believers, the missionary task, religious freedom). In a sermon in Queensland in 1947, E Edwards had a fivefold list: the lordship and saving work of Christ, Scripture, liberty (personal and local church), the two gospel ordinances, and the regenerated church membership. Ken Manley's booklet, *Who are the Baptists?* (Clifford Press # 194) lists 12 points of Baptist belief, but under "Distinctives" in *Baptists: Their Faith and Heritage* (Qld edition 1974) there are five – the Gospel, the Lordship of Christ, the Authority of the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit necessary for conversion, and the fellowship of believers.

Henry Cook's well used, *What Baptists Stand For* begins with the Supremacy of Scripture, then moves on to the Nature of the Church (including the lordship of Christ, its function, membership, unity, local expression, sacraments, and ministry), then baptism and finally liberty. H Wheeler Robinson in *The Life and Faith of the Baptists* starts with biographies and then discusses Baptism and the emphasis on individual experience, the church, the missionary spirit, and liberty.

These distinctives are basically theological convictions, but they can lead on to or include practices and structures as well. They are usually stated quite firmly, and sometimes even dogmatically (as for example, the defence of the two officers position in some systematic theologies.)

There are those who go to even more extreme lengths to include, dogmatically, other ideas such as the use of a particular version of the Bible, an eschatological position, a doctrine of creation or a view on historiography or matters like the ordination of women. Sadly, these more extreme positions often give rise to even more reactionary debate. We could no doubt raise here old jokes about the lengths to which some go in making trivial distinctions about obscure points in order to dis-fellowship others and to anathematise them.

At the other end of the line, the suggestion has been made that there are only a smaller number of distinctives, rather than the larger, traditional numbers mentioned above. We shall refer to examples of that below. Some reduce the distinctives to only one – such as missions/evangelism.

## Causative factors

In viewing these various lists, we can see that some of the items have been introduced because of historical factors. We had an excellent paper last year from Blake Killingsworth which illustrated this process, where the emphasis on individualism was linked to the cultural and philosophical context in which the Baptist movement was emerging (<http://www.bwa-baptist-heritage.org/haw-Killingsworth-Themes.pdf>). The ecclesiastical context of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is also another such factor, while the emphasis on biblical authority is no doubt part of the general Reformation period. The narrowing of that in some circles in later times is due to subsequent developments in theology.

So while it is easy to see that particular circumstances can produce particular responses, it is important to be able to discern whether such "distinctives" are to be regarded a relative and therefore temporary, or whether they are absolute and non-negotiable. It also raises the question whether new contexts will raise new issues in the future which ought to be added to the list of "distinctives". Or to put it differently, we need to look for the essential principles which might appear in different guises according to different historical or other contexts.

Another aspect of this is whether some of the doctrinal points which were once distinctly Baptist were later adopted by others as well; this means that the Baptist witness to an important truth was effective and we could say that the Baptists had achieved at least part of their purpose and could fade out of existence as a separate body.

An example of how historical and political context changes our view of a distinctive position may be seen in the traditional Baptist belief in separation of church and state. The original situation in England was perfectly understandable, but when the English colonies were established in Australia, it was a different political arrangement and so the old doctrine did not quite fit. There is still a difference between Australian Baptists and American Baptists on this matter, while in the former European colonies, Baptists and evangelical Christians in general are taking another line still. We need a clear understanding of what the principle is so that it can be applied appropriately anywhere.

For another example we may note that modern corporate ideas and the needs of efficiency and "productivity" have created havoc with the traditional "two officer" doctrine and congregational government. In other cases, the introduction of elders has taken

Baptists into a presbyterial direction, and the dominant role of the pastor in some situations (even an apostolic role) creates the elements of an episcopal system.

Of course, it is another matter whether any particular position was actually as distinctive in its time as later history made it out to be. For example, for some people there is a fear of anything “Calvinistic” but the 1689 Confession and related documents in proper context tell a different story. A commonly used statement of faith for Australian Baptists is very similar to the Evangelical Alliance statement – the main point that is distinctive being an uncharacteristically verbose statement on the ordinances which is theologically marooned in the present location.

### No definite list

While there is considerable debate around which particular doctrines to include in the list of distinctives, some deal with the problem by stating that Baptists have no unique doctrine, ie, all the “distinctives” are held by other Christians as well. What makes Baptists distinctive is they hold to them all as a group, or they hold them thoroughly and logically than others. As the Queensland Baptist President said in 1947, “While we do not claim we are the only body that believes all these, we do claim that the Baptist Church is the church where the greatest number of people who believe all these are to be found.” (Rockhampton Morning Bulletin, 12 July 1947). It is even in our *We Baptists* (p 22): “No one doctrine is exclusive to Baptists, but no other group has maintained emphases on all these points in this particular way.”

### The Ad Hoc List

Others take advantage of the historical and contextual relativity of the lists and treat them as a miscellaneous group that has simply coalesced more or less accidentally over a period of time. They then feel rightly free to use whatever justification they may choose (or none at all!) to vary the list by dropping some or adding others. As seen already, some argue that there is no biblical justification for the two officer position and abandon it in favour of something else. Others abandon the prerequisite of baptism for church membership, equating a “human” or “church” requirement (viz baptism) with a Pharisaical legalism which is unbiblical. The same reasoning may be used even for retaining no concept of membership except in the loosest possible sense, viz, if you feel this church is your spiritual home, then we will count you as a member.

These moves raise important questions of hermeneutics, exegesis, theology and historical awareness which need to be fully explored. However, we may be relieved to know that there is a completely opposite approach.

### The Integrated list

This approach says that the chosen list of distinctives is tightly integrated theologically and practically and that the various items all arise from a central core or foundational conviction. They are all necessary and it is not possible to discard any of them without damaging the whole edifice. S. Mark Heim puts this nicely:

It is important to note that the baptism of believers is not a simple, detachable belief in a list of several but represents the intersection of several different convictions, each of which leads to it.

(S. Mark Heim, ‘Baptismal recognition and the Baptist Churches’ in Michael Root and Risto Saarinen (editors), *Baptism and the Unity of the Church* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 156;

T. J. Malyon also mentioned it in his retiring presidential address to the 1911 Queensland Assembly when he spoke of “a distinguishing principle which inevitably leads out in various directions.” (Our Principles and Our Mission, Retiring President's Address, Sept. 13, 1911 (Baptist Association of Queensland Year Book 1911-12), 40-48, at page 42) Malyon explained how believers' baptism as the symbol of incorporation into the death and resurrection of Christ is integrally related to the entire gospel and to the indwelling of the risen Lord in the believer. That is, the list of traditional Baptist principles logically cohere and are represented in believers' baptism which, as Malyon stated, is its symbol. Wheeler Robinson states the same in *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, explaining that believer's baptism “has taken the place of any formal creed” for Baptists (p 16).

T. Lorenzen also saw the problem but from the obverse side, stating that for the mainline churches, despite the weight of scholarship that questions the integrity of paedobaptism, “there seems to be no institutional willingness to question the theology and practice of infant baptism. *Any theological challenge to the doctrine of infant baptism is immediately seen as questioning the sacramental integrity of the paedobaptist churches.*” (Thorwald Lorenzen, “Baptism and Church Membership: Some theological theses from an ecumenical Baptist perspective” <http://www.canbap.org/resources/issues/issues7.html>; accessed 3 July 2009; emphasis added)

The existence of a strong integrating factor lies explains why Henry Cook can state that the Baptist conception of the Christian faith is the “most logical and consistent of all Protestant Christians” (H. Cook, *The Why of our Faith*, 92).

This position obviously distinguishes between primary and secondary issues or basic and consequential issues. This means there is some room for variability, depending on the links which are established between the foundations and the superstructure.

A sample of how this works may be found in the discussion of the distinguishing mark of believers' baptism by immersion as made in Henry Cook's *The Why of our Faith*. Towards the end of this popular level book, he discusses the reason why a Christian ought to be a Baptist. Although we do have a good record of witness and service, he says more than that is needed to account for the history and strength of the Baptists. Of course, much more is needed than the trivialised reference to the amount of water used in baptism that can still be heard coming from people who owe it to themselves not to make such embarrassing remarks! Instead, he argues that it is what stands behind that baptism that is the key – believers' baptism stands for the gospel and any other form of baptism obscures or denies the gospel. He then argues forward to show how all of the classic distinctives are derived from that foundational position.

Other examples of this process may start from the Lordship of Christ or the authority of Scripture. However, confusion and conflict between these two may arise because of a failure to distinguish between the formal and the material principles. Some have even suggested that the essential foundational Baptist principle is a matter simply of the authority of Scripture, rather than any particular doctrinal result of the study of that Scripture. This is obviously unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. The answer is to speak of a dynamic integration of the two, which shows that the Lordship of Christ mediated through Scripture as the revealed Word of God is the preferred formulation, with adequate room made also for the present ministry of the Spirit.

Some issues arise from this. One concerns the process of reasoning from core to distinctives – is it true that “if you study the Bible properly, you will certainly become a Baptist”? or are there different hermeneutical and exegetical choices that could be made resulting in different outcomes? After all, others have claimed that their particular doctrinal position is the certain logical outcome of biblical authority (A Kuyper being a famous example). If there are a variety of such choices, what are the factors that lead to making those choices? How much does history, culture and personality affect the process and outcome? As we shall see later, it would be profitable to study parallel baptistic movements such as the Church of Christ, to illuminate this situation.

Other aspects of this question include how generic the list of points would be (so that Baptists are simply to be equated with evangelicals in general) and where the process should stop (ie, do we want a brief set of principles or do we want to go to book-length in setting out our distinctives? This is where we need to discuss the links between Baptists and the Baptistics – are “card carrying” Baptists only a sub-set of a wider group. Can we think of “baptistics” then as making up a significant section of the Christian movement as whole, alongside other major divisions such as a sacramentals, the mainline Protestants and the Charismatics? An Anglican cleric was quoted by William Poole of Queensland as saying: “The Baptists are, I think, the only logical dissenters. . . . there will be ever in the Church Universal two bodies – the one which looks on man in his individual relation to God – the Baptist-Calvinist theory; the other which looks on each man as a member of a great society or corporation, and that society the body of Christ; and this is the theory of our [Anglican] Church.” (*Old Freeman*, Jan 1882, p 4).

## Identifying the Driving Force

There does seem to be consensus that there is a basic principle which historically brought the Baptist movement into being, from which other principles (or Distinctives) are derived. In hindsight, the logical end of the Puritan-Separatist process seemed to be believer's baptism (rather than the prevailing system) as found by Helwys and Smyth in Amsterdam. As Anthony Cross puts it,

For Smyth, the error of infant baptism lay, first, in its separation of the outer rite from the inner transformed life of the believer” He was “careful, therefore, to distinguish the outer and the inner while keeping them together and maintaining the primacy of the inner, Spirit-baptism: ‘as the true Sacraments are not only the outward Elements, but the inward grace also, & that most especially’. This is why he and others adopted believer's baptism.” (in AR Cross and NJ Wood, editors, *Exploring Baptist Origins*, Regents Park College, 2010, pp 18, 19)

The Baptist movement needed a coherent principle as its dynamic power, and an integrating force to give it motivation and focus. As Wheeler Robinson said, ‘If Baptists had contended for a rite without any central or permanent meaning, they would never have grown as they have. There must have been a deep appeal behind the rite, a central truth of permanent importance’ (*Life and Faith*, p 18)

I think it is possible to make a case for this idea of spiritual rebirth or the biblical doctrine of regeneration as the driving force which accounts for the Baptist movement (see my ‘Baptists and other Christians in Australia: ‘Missing in Action, Lost Opportunity or Mission Accomplished?’ ICOBS, 2009). From this basis, it is possible to derive a number of corollaries which together comprise the Baptist distinctives. This solution goes deeper than the commonly quoted views of Wheeler Robinson and others that it is ecclesiology that makes Baptists distinctive.

Therefore if we are going to draw any guidance from the history of the origin of the Baptists (and how they have been sustained), I propose that it comes back to something slightly different from a doctrinal position (and any consequent practical outcomes). It is not a theological position but one that is essentially spiritual albeit with clear doctrinal and practical components.

For this and other reasons, I think we must move on to another way of defining or identifying Baptist identity.

But before we do that, I need to mention briefly some totally different approaches to the traditional distinctives.

## **An Aside - Radical approaches undercutting the quest for Baptist Identity**

There are examples of approaches to Baptist identity which tend to undercut the quest more or less completely.

### **Changes by 'biblical warrant'**

The first one, which has been alluded to above, appeals to the authority of Scripture by exegesis and theology, to make substantial changes to the list of Baptist principles with dubious consequences. The entire process needs careful scrutiny bearing in mind, of course, the Reformation principle that "God has yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word."

### **Product Branding and Franchise**

The second seems to use Baptist identity purely for purposes of product branding and as a religious franchise. In other words, to retain the Baptist name for a church or activity is regarded as being good for its prosperity. (Although in some places, the exact opposite is the case, and the name is dropped as quickly and effectively as possible.)

Related to this is the church that says it is not a typical Baptist church but retains its links to the Baptist denomination for legal purposes or for the sake of corporate accountability. Similarly, others are Baptist because of some historical link or because it was a Baptist missionary or church planter who came to the area – it could just as easily have been someone of a different background. In both cases, if circumstances changed, then the church could swap its denominational links without any problem.

### **Faulty Theological Assumptions**

The third is that any kind of denominational linkage is theologically wrong and damaging. To this category belong some advocates of ecumenism, those who have embraced a post-denominational position and those who think that the mission of the church in the current context needs to be without reference to the past history of Protestantism.

### **Pragmatically annoying**

The fourth to be mentioned here is rather more pragmatic – that any reference to denominationalism is in practical terms a liability – it is likely to distract the local church from its main purpose, it is a drain financially and organizationally, and, being sectarian, is usually a problem for ordinary people.

If these were true and valid, this paper could end now and so could the work of the BWA Identity Commission! However, if we want to be helpful as a Commission, then we need to reject and expose these shallow, futile and sometimes cynical approaches.

If the traditional distinctives are problematic, then we need to try something else. This is where another approach can be examined. This is a simpler scenario and so will not need so much detailed discussion.

## **II Contemporary approach**

### **Identity statements & Core Value Statements**

The limitations of the "distinctives" are clear from the above discussion, but there is another type of approach which has been developed in more recent times. This is represented by "identity statements", Core Value Statements and other similar documents.

As we have noted above, the HIC produced one such statement in 1990 (see appendix). We can think of *We Baptists* as a longer version of the same kind of document because it states, "The following outline of Baptist beliefs is intended to be descriptive of what, according to general agreement, Baptist *do believe*." (p 22) . The European Baptist Federation also produced one in 1992 which was circulated in that area and helpfully used by Paul Beasley-Murray in his book, *Radical Believers: the Baptist way of being the church* (BU Great Britain, 1992, pp 120-124).

At the centenary congress in 2005 held in Birmingham UK, the BWA also adopted a "Message" which was then taken up by the EBF "as a Statement of Baptist Identity which can helpfully summarise the core beliefs and values which are common among European and Middle Eastern Baptists." This replaced their earlier statement.

The American Baptist Churches in the USA also adopted one in 2005 headed, “Identity Statement: We are American Baptists: An Expression of Christian Faith Representative of American Baptists.” It contains some typical doctrinal statements in verbose and in summary form followed by an extensive list of descriptive statements. (<http://www.abc-usa.org/WhoWeAre/Identity/IdentityStatement/tabid/78/Default.aspx>)

Then again, in recent years the Baptist Union of Queensland has revised its entire structure and foundational documents. One of those adopted (as well as a doctrinal statement) is a Core Values Statement. (see <http://develop.qb.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/QB-Guidelines-for-belief-and-practice.pdf>)

Vision and Mission statements, which are quite common amongst churches and conventions, may also be considered under this heading but they are usually so brief as to be of little help.

### **Origins and theories (theoretical and practical)**

I have not seen any detailed explanation of the theory behind these type of documents. No doubt the Core Values Statement which sets out what is important to an organization comes from the corporate world. The text associated with at least some Identity Statements defines them “explaining who we are.” They are also angled at the non-specialist and are usually phrased in ordinary language, rather than theological language, although they do seem to follow a formula.

These statements go beyond theology to include other features of the life of the church, but to some extent they function like confessions of faith in Baptist tradition to reveal what the church actually believes (in contrast with creeds which are prescriptive and authoritarian. )

### **Descriptive and aspirational/visionary**

So these statements are descriptive but also aspirational and visionary, setting out what the church would like to think it is (or will be) like. To some extent they are also more realistic, dealing with the practical realities of everyday church life. However, the element of “vision statement” gives them their power.

As explanatory statements, we can see that they can link basic principles (or distinctives) with practices and the general life of the church.

An example of this is the statement of the American Baptist Churches in the USA, which includes this:

God has given this particular community of believers called Baptists a distinctive history and experience. As we share in common with Christians everywhere, so Baptists everywhere celebrate a common heritage. THEREFORE With Baptist brothers and sisters around the world, we believe: (then follows a list of distinctives)

They can also provide more wiggle room in the life of the church than do the distinctives. This is an advantage in the post-modern age. However, because of this flexibility and imprecision, there is a question about how strictly they can be used to learn about the life of the church. What is their actual role? What authority do they carry if they are not the kind of documents that can be used to define the life of the church in measurable terms? The more biblical and theological they are, the more authoritative and the less appealing as an alternative to the distinctives. We may conclude that they are aspirational and visionary documents which have a valid place but cannot be used to replace other kinds of statements.

However, because of their nature as explanatory statements, they are capable of revealing the inner dynamics by which basic principles are translated into outward action. That is, they can show how hermeneutics, exegesis and theology are put to work to produce a result for the practical world. They are able to display the way in which the driving force which is responsible for the creation and on-going Baptist life is translated into the shape and activities of the church.

### **Transparency and transferability**

This transparency is helpful in another way which is particularly useful in times of flux and transition.

Because they show the way principles and practice are linked, they are useful in seeing how one group of people dealt with their particular situation. Thus others may be able to use the same process and the same principles but devise new practices, strategies and forms to deal with their own situation.

An example of this might be the difference in deployment of servant leadership, ministry gifts and every member involvement in a western individualistic and democratic society compared with a society based on family units and strong leadership. Behind both the western European individualist context and the non-western family clan society there should be evident a clear biblical

principle stemming from the basic Baptist ecclesiology which is derived from our basic driving force. Yet the outworking of it in the different contexts may be surprising.

There are no doubt many different types and examples of these statements, including much longer ones than the examples cited here. Their virtue is the way they explain Baptist life. But the tendency for them to become idealistic is strong.

So we need to go one step further. This is where I propose a third approach.

### III A Reality Check Please

#### Checking with empirical Data

It is easy for people to make claims about holding to a doctrinal statement, to have a list of distinctives and the set up identity statements and list their core values, but some times these bear little correlation with their actual day by day position. So it would be helpful to compare distinctives and identity claims against reality by the use of various measuring tools.

So this is a proposal about using empirical data to check the claims made by the documents discussed above.

There are numerous ways in which this could be done – interviews, surveys, focus groups, statistics, literature (including promotional material). An interesting example using the narratives of people’s lives is Tom Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming A Baptist Identity*. Wheeler Robinson helpfully used this approach in the opening section of his *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*.

Ecumenical dialogue is another effective way of discovering the differences and similarities between Baptists and others. This is very clearly indicated in Ken Manley’s paper to the joint meeting of the BWA Heritage and Identity and Doctrine and Inter-church Cooperation Commissions at Seville, July 2002, “A Survey of Baptist World Alliance Conversations with other Churches and some implications for Baptist Identity.” In the closing section he listed the issues which had been identified in dialogue which “Baptists might together consider as they work on the identity question.” These were Authority and Scripture, Ecclesiology, Baptism, Mission, and Ministry (Thanks to Dr Manley for making this paper available to me in electronic form.)

The basic quest here is to line up the empirical data gained in various ways with the claims made by the identity statements and lists of distinctives to see whether Baptists are as distinctive as they would like to think they are. The findings of the Australian National Church Life Survey taken at about the same time as the national census is most revealing indicating as it does the views of the local church in comparison with its denomination and the total survey sample in a large number of categories. Taking one sample at random, a reasonably sized regional church in Queensland was revealed to be more literalistic on the Bible than other Baptists and valued Bible study groups about the same, but did not value Bible-based sermons as much, or prayer

#### Strategies

Everything depends on how the questions are framed and how the statistics are handled! Here are some suggestions for getting at the real issues we are seeking:

- **“Hello, hello, What is going on here?”** - this is the gathering of factual data about what Baptists are like – beliefs, practices, priorities, results etc which can be carried out by surveys, censuses, interviews and the like. Several powerful movements such as Church Growth, Seeker Sensitive, Purpose Driven Church have been so widely adopted by many denominations that churches are now much more similar than they were. We need this kind of data to help us determine the actual situation about Baptist claims.
- **“I Like the Baptists because they do/believe/are .....”**. Imagine someone is wanting to change their church and they say they are inclined towards the Baptists. Find out what they would say to complete this sentence!

Church ‘swappers’ often report that they find Baptist churches to be an “open space” between the liturgical mainstream and the “looney left” where biblical authority, fellowship, evangelism, missions, and social responsibility can flourish. (The Australian NCLS in 1991 showed that 37 per cent of Baptist attenders came from other denominations, especially mainliners.)

- **“They cannot be Baptists if that's what they are doing!”** (Pathology) Sometimes it is helpful to find out the truth of something by looking at its opposite or negative. What are people referring to when they make this statement, and what is it about that actions that are so un-Baptist? If that is un-Baptist, what is Baptist?



Critical situations in the life of a church or denomination can be an opportunity for deeper reflection on self-identity as was the case for Queensland Baptists following a series particularly difficult problems in the 1990s, resulting in a whole set of new documents and standards. Included in this response was a decision to set a minimum standard of “Baptist distinctives” in the area of congregational government and doctrinal basis for churches wishing to be affiliated with the Union. <http://develop.qb.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/QB-Guidelines-for-belief-and-practice.pdf> and <http://www.qb.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/08-Constitution-and-By-laws-May-2010.pdf>

- **“They are really the same as us, except that they do/believe .....**” (comparative anatomy) When thinking about those church groups that are close to us, what is it that we hold to and they do not? Groups in question include Churches/Disciples of Christ, Christian Brethren, some Pentecostal/Charismatic groups, independent /Bible churches. To see where groups diverge on perhaps small points gives an opportunity to study the actual make-up of the church and to understand its functioning dynamics more accurately. One Queensland pastor was noted early in his ministry for opposing fellowship with paedo-baptist groups but later in life he switched the Church/Disciples of Christ. Was his original view really Baptist? The first Church of Christ to be established in the state resulted from a coup at a Baptist church in which people were told they had been taught the wrong doctrine on baptism but were now privileged to be given the truth, communicated on large charts covering the walls of the small building during a “mission” preached by a visiting “evangelist.” The differences were very obvious to some but they were powerless to stop the takeover.

Whatever the process, the aim is to:-

- a) discover the actual distinctiveness of Baptist churches and people in empirical terms
- b) account for and understand these differences both generally and in particular cases, especially looking for non-theological factors
- c) discover how these differences relate to the Distinctives and to the Identity Statements
- d) consider the significance and implications of these findings for church, denomination, BWA

A further general stage in the process is to synthesize our findings with the Sections I and II above to obtain a comprehensive yet nuanced view of Baptist Identity.

By looking at the empirical data in the light of the Distinctives and Identity Statements, it would be possible to understand better which it is that makes Baptists distinctive and what holds us together as a denominational movement in the world. Or in other words, how the distinctive Baptist driving force expresses itself most purely in its principles and practice. This should be able provide a way forward in the case of current contentious matters such as leadership and structure, the place of Scripture, mission and evangelism, or the nature of the “sacraments”. It should also clarify the logic of many decisions and the way non-theological factors are operative.

Now that we have a way of getting a clear and accurate picture of Baptist principles and practice on a wide perspective, there is one final question to discuss – what are we going to do with these findings?

## IV Using the Findings

### Value of a clear view of Baptist Identity

As we noted, some people dismiss the whole quest for Baptist Identity, but we have not taken that path. We understand that there is virtue in

- celebrating our heritage and gift as something entrusted to us by God himself
- understanding and using its dynamics for new situations – the world is certainly different from the 17<sup>th</sup> century but this also applies to every new place where a church is planted

### What do we do with it?

Now that we have a way of coming to a broad and detailed consensus on what constitute Baptist Identity, we need to ask what we can do with such an understanding?

Various approaches are possible

- defining Baptists by contrast (rigid sectarian denominationalism)

- defining Baptists by family traits (a post-modern approach which says we all have our story and everyone's story is as valuable as the rest, although none should be considered to be the "Royal Family" dominating the rest)
- defining Baptists so they can contribute their special God-given insights with confidence and humility to the Kingdom and Mission of God

## Implications

This assumes that there is still a need for the distinctive Baptist witness, ie, that the original driving force (in whatever form of expression is appropriate in our context) is valid. This being the case, there is a heavy responsibility upon us to be faithful to it. As Wheeler Robinson said, "The Baptist contribution to the religious life of the nation during the last three centuries . . . has been less than it might have been" – partly because of "failure to maintain the high ideal of a regenerate church." (*Life and Faith*, 15) Malyon put it more bluntly: "Further, because we believe the ordinance of baptism is dreadfully and disastrously perverted, and the spiritual constitution of the Church mischievously misunderstood, our mission must be one of courteous but unflinching testimony."

Therefore, we need to have some expectation of how this clear understanding of Baptist Identity will benefit the local church, the conventions, the BWA and others. Instead of it being a topic for endless discussion and not a little frustration, it should be possible to let it serve us as we serve the Kingdom of God. We need to delineate ways in which it would appear and how it would work out in all parts of our denomination.

## Conclusion and Proposal

If there is a measure of agreement for this presentation, I suggest that we as the BWA HIC need to go ahead with a project on Baptist Identity. This project would survey and analyse historical and current data and after synthesizing the findings, publish useful statements and documents for the benefit of the Baptist family. I append a proposal for this kind of project.

## Appendix Proposal for HIC Project

### Introduction

- Extent – a project for HIC and others covering the global scene and extending over the rest of the current 5 year period
- Dissemination – publish the results through HIC website etc and BWA reports – also send to as many journals, conventions etc as possible
- Recommendations – make specific recommendations to relevant bodies – BWA, conventions, churches etc
- Popular level – guide sheets, strategy documents for conventions, press articles, how-to books etc
- BWA – input into General Council and Congress

### I Importance and value of the topic

- For BWA and HIC
- For Churches, conventions etc
- In terms of the current ecclesiastical scene

Frame the topic and terms of investigation

Anticipated outcomes delineated

### II Collecting Data

- Investigate the factors which distinguish Baptists as Baptist geographically and culturally
- Investigate the factors which distinguish Baptists as Baptist historically
- Document attitudes towards Baptist identity in ecumenical discussion
- Collect sample statements of Baptist distinctives, statements of identity and core values, promotional material and other relevant literature

### III Synthesis

Synthesise above data into workable categories

### IV Analysis

Analyse the above data and synthesis to realise overall trends and factors etc

### V Conclusion

Develop comprehensive statement based on the above to indicate findings on Baptist Identity

### VI Implications and Implementation

Promulgate findings as indicated above

## Appendix: BWA HIC Statement 1989

### Preamble

This statement on Baptist identity was produced by the Commission on Baptist Heritage as a working document for the 1986-90 Quinquennium and arises out of a brain-storming exercise at their Singapore meeting. It is deliberately intended to be a descriptive rather than a credal statement, and it is recognized that there may well need to be flexibility in translation for use in particular local situations.

### The Scriptures

Baptists start with the Scriptures, which afford us God's self-revelation, first in the unfolding of a concern for His People, but supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures, as related by the Holy Spirit to our contemporary situation, are our authority in all matters of faith and practice.

### What is the Gospel?

Men and women everywhere are alienated from God and from the world as God designed it. The Biblical word for this is Sin, which the Bible says is so serious that we cannot remedy this condition ourselves: there must be a radical new start which, in John 3, Jesus calls the "new birth." The first word of the Christian gospel must always be Grace: not what we aspire to do but what God has done for us without any claim or work on our part. The grace of God, expressed in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, makes possible the restoration of the relationship with God that sin has spoiled. But this grace which is God's free gift to all of us, like every other gift, has to be received or accepted for its purpose to be secured. This is the response that the Scriptures call Faith: a free, total and unconditional entrusting of our lives to Almighty God. We are invited to put our trust in Jesus Christ because, in Him, God has reached out to touch our sinful humanity.

Clearly this is an action that no one can take for anyone else – each individual must make a free and unfettered response for him/herself. Equally clearly, that act of trust must involve an intention to obey God's declared will, for unless this be so, the word trust is evacuated of all possible meaning and effectiveness.

### What is the Church?

Unlike many others, Baptists do not define the church in terms of structures of ministry or by the regular celebration of the ordinances. Rather, they believe that as individuals come to put their trust in God and confess Christ as Savior and Lord, (which they believe to be the scriptural conditions for baptism) so the church is created. This is why they have been advocates of what has been called the Believers' Church or the Gathered Community (of believers gathered out of the world). From this conviction as to the nature of the church as constituted by believers covenanting together in common confession of the name of Jesus, it is seen that their practice of confining baptism (by immersion) to believers only, is entirely logical.

A local church so constituted represents in any place the church in that locality; it is fully the church, not a branch of some national or wider institution. Under the Lordship of Christ and before the open Scriptures, it is competent, when properly summoned, in church meeting to govern itself, to determine a strategy for mission in its locality, and to appoint its ministers (deacons and pastors) and other officers. These officers will serve its interests and execute its will in matters pastoral, educational and practical, but the first authority for all decision-making in a Baptist church must remain in whole church meeting.

Baptist churches reject all state interference in their activities. Each local church is free, and indeed duty-bound by the concerns of the gospel, to enter into covenant relationship with other Christians, both nationally and locally. In Baptist life, relationships have traditionally been in associations, conventions and unions, in support of missionary work at home and abroad, and internationally through the Baptist World Alliance.

Baptists ordain men, and in some, but not all parts of the family, women to the Ministry of the Word, and expect their ministries to be respected for their sacred calling. The witness and service of the church is not seen by Baptists, however, as exclusively the work of the ordained ministry but as inclusively the responsibility of the whole membership.

Most Baptists find no difficulty in a lay person celebrating at the Lord's Table or in the Baptismal Pool, ordinances which are seen by Baptists as symbolic of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and of each believer's identification, by faith, with Him, in both dying to sin and rising to new life in Him. This same Christocentric gospel is preached from Baptist pulpits Sunday by Sunday, for proclamation retains a central place in Baptist worship.

### What is Discipleship?

Personal commitment is the starting point for every Christian, yet all need to discover the corporate dimension of the church: in common worship, in generous giving to fellowship needs, and in loyal participation in the mission of the local church.

Baptists are an evangelistic people who have always been committed to sharing their faith, to the extension of the church, and for the last two hundred years to overseas mission as well. In the name of their Lord they have given themselves to the care of the needy and oppressed. Increasingly in the twentieth century (although also in earlier times), they have seen the need to speak and act prophetically, denouncing structural evil wherever it puts God's "Shalom" at risk. Opposed to everything that denies the rule of Christ, some even suffer imprisonment and martyrdom for their steadfast witness, imposing an obligation on all the family to support them in both prayer and action.

Recognizing the vast demands of Christian witness and discipleship, Baptists have always been a praying people, in both corporate prayer and in encouraging a pattern of individual spirituality that requires each church member to engage in regular prayer and Bible study, for the whole of Scripture rather than abstracted creed is for Baptists the determinant alike of corporate belief and individual action.

Because Baptists delay baptism until an individual has made a personal confession of faith, they are especially concerned for the Christian nurture of children and young people until they come to acknowledge Christ as Savior for themselves, thus fulfilling promises made at services of thanksgiving and blessing that they have become a common celebration of the gift of children among Baptists.

Baptists were among the first to campaign for liberation of opinion and religious practice, not only for themselves but for all people, including the unbeliever, for they believed that each individual needed to be free to make choices about faith and commitment unfettered by any outside agency. Such freedom has led the Baptists to be a diverse people with no over-arching rule demanding common thought or practice among them. But amidst that diversity there is a unity because freedom from the state or from ecclesiastical hierarchies has also meant freedom to develop in each situation a style of churchmanship which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they believe best serves the interests of the kingdom.

Many of the characteristics described here, if not all, are held by other Christian groups. Baptist distinctiveness is best seen in holding all these attitudes together in a way that is at once loyal to the traditions of Reformed Christianity without being sectarian. They are aware that they are but one part of the whole family of Christ's church here on earth, and seek in different ways (some within and others outside formal ecumenical structures) to lend support to the whole of the Church's work at the witness to the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed.

Baptists are:

- members of the whole Christian family who stress the experience of personal salvation through faith in Jesus, symbolized both in baptism and the Lord's Supper;
- those who under the Lordship of Jesus Christ have bonded together in free local congregations, together seeking to obey Christ in faith and in life;
- those who follow the authority of Scriptures in all matters of faith and practice;
- those who have claimed religious liberty for themselves and all people;
- those who believe that the Great Commission to take the Gospel to the whole world is the responsibility of the whole membership.



# Identifying the Baptist DNA

## Mapping a 21st Century Global Baptist Identity - Part 2

*Paper for BWA Heritage and Identity Commission, Santiago, Chile, July 2012*

*by David Parker, Brisbane, Australia (revised 12.7.12)*

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### Synopsis:

This paper is a continuation of author's presentation at the 2011 BWA Heritage and Identity Commission sessions at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in which he proposed an empirical approach to the question of Baptist identity as a means of resolving some of the dilemmas experienced at the present time.

This paper provides a sample of the empirical approach to test this methodology and the (tentative) results which may be obtained from it, comparing the findings with the traditional distinctives represented by the mnemonic, B A P T I S T.

After reviewing the issues raised in the previous paper, it goes on to examine objective empirical data about Baptists obtained from several surveys and related information in Australia, and then more restricted survey data from Scotland.

The second form of objective data comes from general church histories and articles overviewing Baptists in different parts of the world, including Asia. This is supplemented by the observations and conclusions of certain Baptist scholars in North America and Europe which crystallise the main characteristics of Baptists in those regions.

A third type of data is obtained from the promotional and descriptive material published by churches, in this instance using randomly selected websites. As well as the traditional style of churches which maintain the normal pattern of Baptist life (to a greater or lesser degree), four types were identified – conservative, Reformed, charismatic/apostolic, and Bible churches.

The conclusion is that the methodology is effective and the shows that the traditional Baptist distinctives while still recognizable have been transmuted in many ways, raising particular issues about church structure and governance, the understanding and practice of the ordinances, and the attitude of Baptists toward associationalism.

**Note** that the presentation of this paper was assisted by a contribution from the BWA Doctrine and Christian Unity Commission, updating the section on ecumenical relations which was part of the first paper. It was also assisted by the results of an ad hoc survey of BWA delegates responding to four questions relating to Baptist identity which related to the questions listed in Part I. They included important Baptist distinctives, reasons for choosing a Baptist church in contrast with other denominations, un-Baptist beliefs and practices and changes to Baptist practices over time.

# I Introduction

This paper is a follow-up to my presentation last year in Kuala Lumpur<sup>1</sup> in which I made some proposals about how to deal with the contentious and slippery problem of understanding global Baptist identity. Believing that this is an important, although somewhat neglected, part of our brief as the “Heritage and Identity” Commission of the BWA, I suggested that we need to follow multiple procedures to avoid the log-jam represented by the traditional approach to Baptist distinctives, which can be typically referred to by the acrostic BAPTIST. (BAPTIST - Bible, Autonomy, Priesthood of All believers, Two Sacraments, Independence, Soul freedom etc, Two leaders)

An example of the problem we face is found in one response to the Baptist Union of Great Britain website devoted to celebrating 2012 as the 400<sup>th</sup> year of Baptist work in that region. One person said that the connection of their church with the Baptist denomination was “inconsequential”.

However, this negative, short-sighted and depressing view was not the only one, because another said this:

[T]here is something in our DNA which, although expressed differently and freely in each place, provides us with a common identity: we all understand ourselves as Christ’s church. You see, I actively chose to be a Baptist; when discerning a call to ministry I was attracted to this denomination above all others, because I think there is something unique summed up in our Declaration of Principle, which gives us a revolutionary approach to handling the challenges of the 21st Century (women’s ministry and homosexuality are two good examples so far...) and the diversity of opinion on those issues.<sup>2</sup>

Bill Leonard is also extremely pessimistic about Baptist identity – the opening chapter of his *Baptist Ways*<sup>3</sup> starts on this theme with a quotation referring to changes over time, and then expanding on it, covers such topics as the Bible, baptism, theology, and practice. He argues, “In short, describing particular distinctives that typify Baptist identity requires extensive qualification” (p 2). He adds further weight to his contention by reference to early and later historians and then provides a list of “eight dialectics” to suggest that the “classic distinctives” have presented themselves dynamically, “moving in tandem across a wide spectrum of belief and practice.”

Martin Sutherland of New Zealand takes a similar approach, stating that,

rather than defining Baptist thought by confessions and defended doctrines we may better see it, like the church itself, as *telic*, moving forward, changing and morphing as contexts and demands alter and shift, seeking to reflect a world to come. Rather than *driven* – by logic, institutions form or even text – Baptists may perhaps better be understood to be *drawn* forward, infinitely (if imperfectly) responsive to the rich magnificence of the Kingdom<sup>4</sup>

It is true, as Leonard notes, that “Dissent is one of the Baptist ways”, so these observations cannot be easily dismissed. However, if there was no substantial fundamental “common [Baptist] identity”, I think we would see a significant decline in the number and strength of Baptist and baptistic groups over time, but despite many changes, there is no evidence that this is so. It is rather the opposite as Martin Marty’s famous neologism, *baptistification*, suggests.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Parker, ‘Baptist Identity as a Project of the BWA Heritage and Identity Commission: Mapping a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Global Baptist Identity’ <http://www.bwa-baptist-heritage.org/ParkerBI2011.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.beyond400.net/submit-articles/my-articles/entry/11-why-i-am-a-baptist> (accessed 4 June 2012)

<sup>3</sup> Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways: a history* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Sutherland, *Conflict and Connection: Baptist Identity in New Zealand* (Auckland: Archer Press, 2011) page xix; see also page 82 where he states that conflict and connection have been the factors creating the NZ Baptist identity.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Baptistification Takes Over’ “The above claim appeared not in a Baptist publication but in the September 2, 1983 issue of *Christianity Today*. It is the headline of a major article by noted Lutheran Church historian, Dr. Martin E. Marty, Professor of Modern Christianity at The University of Chicago. He coins the word ‘baptistification’ to describe what he calls the “most dramatic shift in power style on the Christian scene in our time, perhaps in our epoch.” “Baptistification” refers to the Baptists and their spiritual kin as an alternative Christian expression to the Catholic, or a more traditional and liturgical approach.” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/1985/issue6/612.html>

## ***New Ways***

Yet, the traditional approaches are not proving very helpful, so we need to look at alternative ways of understanding our distinctiveness. In other words, we need to find a way of understanding the precise nature of the driving force behind Baptists which brought the movement into being in the first place and has sustained it to the present. The assumption is that any movement such as the Baptists needs a coherent principle to maintain itself; if there is none, then the movement eventually disappears. But if it remains, those who are part of the movement need to understand it in a valid and helpful way. That I see is an important part of the reason for the existence of an “identity” element in the charter of our BWA Commission.

Leonard’s way of “dialectics” offers some help in understanding the path that Baptists have trod, but we are trying to find the DNA that gives us our “common identity.” At the end of his 425 page journey, he does find a list of a dozen “common marks” (on which more later), but he is still pessimistic - the 13<sup>th</sup> is: “Being Baptist is messy, controversial and divisive.”<sup>6</sup> Walter Shurden’s *The Baptist Identity*<sup>7</sup> provides a good collection of identity statements (pp 61-119), but I believe there are other ways worth exploring to help us find the common identity.

My 2011 paper examined many factors related to the traditional historical distinctives (represented by BAPTIST) emphasising the difficulties currently faced by that approach. I also referred to the negative version of that approach where people undermine or discount the traditional distinctives in the hope of rendering them null and void and thus freeing themselves from any obligation to understand, practice or promulgate them in an intentional manner. Then I proposed that there are other ways of understanding Baptist identity apart from the traditional historical markers.

I do not intend to discuss the situation where people and churches recognize (however grudgingly or otherwise) that there are historical links between themselves now and Baptists in the past and a heritage derived therefrom, but for whom there is no explicit distinctive Baptist theology or practice, and where there is no current interest in the Baptist heritage.

However, some of what I have to say does refer to the situation where groups do exhibit baptistic theology and practice, either by way of a substantial heritage or because they have come to such positions independently, but who do not acknowledge their position as being Baptist and do not establish any links with Baptist groups. They are possibly in the same situation as pioneers of any movement who follow their own consciences and develop their own views, only to find later that they share their position with others and so come to associate with them out of mutual interest. A post-denominational or non-denominational age does not favour such developments but it may be that many of the new independent churches that we see today, often clearly baptistic, will in time coalesce into groupings of the kind that we have for many years called “denominations.”

## ***Other approaches***

First of all I suggested that we should examine **identity and core value statements** as a way of identifying what Baptists thought of themselves. I will turn to this area later.

## **Ecumenical**

One well documented way of examining differences between Baptists and others is to study ecumenical dialogues, especially those involving Baptists, but also others. One celebrated example was the 1982 LIMA document<sup>8</sup> on baptism, eucharist and ministry, where churches were given the opportunity of responding with their comments to be formally published. Although Baptists were involved in the original process, the Baptist response was instructive, although, it might be argued, still within the framework of the traditional historical and theological distinctives.

I referred to a summation of these ecumenical findings found in a paper by Dr Ken Manley (Melbourne) to our Commission in 2002 where he was giving an overview of official Baptist dialogues up to that time. He concluded the paper by listing some of the key issues for Baptists which they might “consider as they work on the identity question.” These were Authority and Scripture, Ecclesiology, Baptism, Mission, and Ministry. I suggested that this list was a useful pointer of Baptist identity in that ecumenical context.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways: a history* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), 424.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, Ga: Smyth and Helwys, 1993), 61-119.

<sup>8</sup> Available at [http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/FO1982\\_111\\_en.pdf](http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/FO1982_111_en.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Ken R Manley, “A Survey of Baptist World Alliance Conversations with other Churches and some implications for Baptist



These are formal contexts reflecting official denominational positions, and are, perhaps restricted to somewhat traditional views, and thus are not dissimilar from the approach of the traditional BAPTIST distinctives. However, they do give a valid outcome because they indicate the points of difference resulting from an extremely close, detailed and critical analysis of the respective denominational positions. I was hopeful of obtaining similar reflections resulting from BWA dialogues in the last ten years since Ken's paper was written, but I have been unable so far to do so. However, the reports of these dialogues are now available on the BWA website (in rough scans) so the raw material is available for study.<sup>10</sup>

Another perspective could be obtained from the grass-roots by collating information gleaned from some of the many examples of local church cooperation that take place in communities around the world. These activities include anything from shared worship services at Easter or Christmas, and combined evangelistic crusades, home Bible study or prayer and fellowship groups, to joint welfare and social action programs. In some cases there are more adventurous ventures such as spiritual retreats or formal ecumenical negotiations. Baptists often take the initiative in these joint efforts, and may provide much of the personal and material resources. However, there are sometimes aspects of these activities in which Baptists decline to participate. While there may be purely practical, personal or political reasons for such action, there may also be clear differences of conviction and spirituality that account for actions of Baptists. The reverse of this could also be instructive – ie, cases where Baptists are interested to engage in some activity, but other churches decline to become involved.

## II Objective empirical data

But now I want to look at the other alternative I mentioned last year, ie., **empirical data** about Baptists, an area in which I believe we can make some progress.

I suggested last year that an objective descriptive approach to actual Baptist life would help us to see what characterizes Baptists, and that this might be a more useful approach to learning about their distinctives than either historical principles or their own aspirational claims. I mentioned four different ways that could provide this data – first, statistical data; second, reasons given why church swappers choose a Baptist church; Baptist pathology where certain beliefs and practices are considered to be un-Baptist or even anti-Baptist; and finally, comparative anatomy where Baptists are compared with others, especially those who may be considered close cousins.

I summed up these approaches as follows (and illustrated them with a few samples from Commission members and others):

- What is going on here?
- I like Baptists because they do/believe/are .....!
- They cannot be Baptist if that .... is what they are doing!
- They are really the same as us, except that they do/believe . . . .

What follows is a development of what I suggested last year and constitutes a sample of the kind of approach that can be taken. First of all, it illustrates the methodology, and then then it goes on to give some substantive (if tentative) results.

### Surveys

In Australia, the "National Church Life Survey" has been operating since 1990 and conducts a major survey of church life every five years at about the same time as the official Australian Government Census. The Government Census does have a question on religion and although it is optional, the data provided by it is quite useful, especially when related to the extensive amount of social data that the Census collects. The NCLS data is quite detailed in itself and there is the further advantage of being able to correlate it with the Census results.<sup>11</sup>

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Identity." A paper to Joint meeting of Baptist Heritage and Identity Commission and the Doctrine and Interchurch Cooperation Commission, Seville, July, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bwanet.org/programs/mission-evangelism-and-theological-reflection> These reports cover all dialogues.

<sup>11</sup> The NCLS data is available in unpublished reports made available to respondents; in this case, the documents are from the Baptist Church Archives, Queensland, *NCLS 2006, Regional Church Life Profile, Baptist Church Queensland*.

Participation by churches in the NCLS is voluntary and at their own expense, so data collected varies in quality. Results are available for each local church, and also for the denomination in a given region (in our case, the state Baptist Union) and finally for the denomination nationally. The NCLS organisation also publishes a range of general reports in the form of papers and books, but often information about Baptists does not appear separately in these materials. Instead we are grouped with "other protestants" or the like.

I commence with figures for the 1996 survey for the state of Queensland where there were 140 churches and 13,000 members in the Baptist Union.

## **NCLS Queensland 1996**

In regard to general demographics, Baptists were slightly older than the community profile, but there were not as many aged as in other denominations; there were slightly more men than other churches, but Baptists were slightly less well educated; they had that same ethnic profile as others.

At the church level, there were more switchers (people transferring from other denominations) and more transfers from other churches of the same denomination than for other denominations (the total of these two is 44% to 27%) but Baptists did no better than others in attracting complete newcomers, although they did do better in retaining children and young people of church families.

Looking more closely at church life, Baptists are more likely to be involved in small group ministries than others (70% to 63%) but this did not apply in the case of groups oriented to social action.

There was no greater sense of belonging to the local church for Baptists than for others - in fact, more Baptists say their sense of belonging was declining, which may reflect the traumas of the 1990s when wholesale changes to contemporary worship were in full swing and there were many changes to structure and leadership of local churches and the denomination. These factors created a great deal of dissatisfaction, and many departures from local churches.

Contemporary worship was strongly favoured, especially by the young; there was in fact a straight cross-over graph indicating the crucial age was in the 40s. On the other hand, there was not always a sense of worship, which was accentuated among the young. Despite the support for contemporary worship, Baptists were not as involved in the worship service as other denominations, and neither were they as concerned about their buildings as special places; they regarded them as simply functional facilities.

Preaching was very important for Baptists but there was little measurable difference from other churches. Baptists were more likely than others to have regular private devotions (77% to 69%) and more were involved in prayer meetings (54% to 43%). However, there was no difference between Baptists and others in terms of their perception of their own personal growth in faith. Few Baptists took the Lord's supper as sacramental (4% vs 13%) - most took it as recalling the death of Jesus (89% to 69%)

Regarding the Bible, Baptists were much more likely than others to interpret it literally (52% to 35%) although this probably did not mean they took it in a fundamentalist way, but rather taking the plain sense of the text and accepting it as authoritative. They were much less likely than others to interpret the Bible according to tradition (8% to 21%) although this might refer only to formalised and official traditions and creedal authorities, not local informal traditions. They were about the same as others in interpreting the Bible according to context (38% to 39%).

Figures for evangelism and general activity in sharing one's faith were interesting for a group that prides itself on its missionary and evangelistic zeal. For example, there were just as many Baptists as others who claimed to have had a gradual conversion (48% to 53%), but many more could point to a specific moment of conversion (50% to 33%). Baptists were somewhat more likely to say personal witness was difficult (29% to 24%, particular in the case of the young); they were about the same as others in saying they were at ease in sharing their faith, and similarly, were about the same as others in seeking opportunities to witness. There was no difference between Baptists and others in inviting people to church and nor was there much difference regarding involvement in organised evangelistic efforts at local church level (but there was much less interest by Baptists in local church organised social welfare projects!). Baptists were less likely than others to say that there was no need for specific witness but that life and one's actions were sufficient (5% to 11% oriented in favour of older people)

Baptists were down a little in comparison with others in seeing the denomination as a primary or important factor for them and their local church (53% to 61%), conversely, Baptists rated higher than others in saying that the denomination is of little importance or only one factor amongst others in affecting them and their local churches (43% to 33%).

## Evaluation

So overall we can say that Queensland Baptists were not particularly evangelistic, the local “gathered fellowship” was not particularly important and the denomination even less so. The corporate experience of worship while popular was not highly effective. The Bible and its study and preaching were regarded important, but not a great deal more so than for others, and the same applied to impact of the Bible and preaching on their growth in faith. This is despite the fact that they took the Bible as more literally authoritative than others.

In terms of our traditional BAPTIST distinctives, **B** was strong but not as distinctive as expected; **A** (and **I**) was very strong but in an isolationist way; **P** was mediocre; **T** strongly Zwinglian; **S** was individualistic, and **T** was not measured

The latest NCLS figures available are from 2006 but the sample was very small and the report is presented differently. What does appear to be true is that the sense of belonging and being involved in the local church has grown so that this feature is the highest ranking characteristic (and greater than for other denominations, although no more so than other Baptists). Personal devotional practice was also highly regarded but not more so than others. Other “strengths” fell considerably below these – viz, preaching (same as others), outreach (better than other churches but same as other Baptists), and then dropping down in importance again, social service and welcoming newcomers. Queensland Baptists attracted a far higher rate of people from other denominations than other Baptists or other churches so the above characteristics were considered by some at least (initially) as a good option.

By these figures, the local church has become more important, and so also has personal spirituality. Another table in the report gives figures for what church attenders “value” and “hope for”. Bible based sermons and teaching were the clear winners, and well above other denominations. Contemporary worship followed although at a lower level and considerably more than with other Baptists and other denominations. Ministries such as outreach, prayer and the Lord’s Supper were very much lower down the scale. Areas where much more emphasis was desired included, in order, the use of spiritual gifts, integrating newcomers into the church, small groups, worship that nurtures and encouraging personal witness.

## Victoria 1991

A second slightly different example may be cited. In 1991, an extensive report was commissioned by the Baptist Union of Victoria. It was known as “A People Called Baptist : the Report of the Heritage Task Force to the Annual Assembly, 1991” (38pp; unpublished) (abbreviation PCB). It used local information with some additional insights and ideas from Dr Ralph Elliott of the American Baptist Churches, and Rev Fred Bacon, from the United Kingdom who had conducted analogous projects. The local material was solicited in the form of surveys sent to representative of types of churches (eg city, rural, large, small etc; but not there was no attempt to cover the wide range of ethnic churches). The report advised that allowances were needed because it surveyed people actually attending church. (This is a similar limitation for the NCLS which began its program after the Victorian Baptist project.)

PCB reported a similar demographic profile as the Queensland NCLS; it found that Baptists were better educated and enjoyed a higher work status than the community generally (p 12). So the Baptist community was “overwhelmingly middle or upper class in its membership” (p 12).

Reflecting one aspect of my 2011 paper, PCB asked what brought people to that particular church. Overall, the highest factors were the theology of the church, the type of worship service and having come from a Baptist home. For those who came from another denomination, the top factors were type of worship service, theology of the church and the influence of the minister.

Another key issue was what Victorian Baptists thought was important about being Baptist. The top four factors, in order, were believers’ baptism, the necessity of conversion for membership, emphasis on evangelism, a free form of worship (with other types coming close behind); the lowest rated factors were links with other denominations and links with other Baptist churches.

Factors for becoming (or retaining) membership of Baptist church were again, in order, conversion, believers’ baptism, regular worship and attendance at Communion, with the lowest being local traditions and Baptist heritage!

The survey data was further analysed to give some of the most common important themes which were grouped under the following five factors – involvement in the local church in various ways, freedom, evangelical belief (including baptism, conversion, missions and evangelism), Baptist tradition and free worship. Ranking these factors showed that involvement in the life of the church and evangelical orientation were most important, while Baptist tradition and freedom were lowest. Not surprisingly, the older age group was more in favour of Baptist tradition, while the younger ones were not interested in this factor or freedom but more oriented to evangelicalism. As the report concluded on this matter, “Those aspects of Baptist life which are most distinctive in a historical sense are those which are presently most attenuated in the life of the denomination.” (p 18)

The same data was analysed in terms of people coming into the Baptist churches from other denominations. Most people were coming from similar evangelical churches, not main-line, and they scored higher than existing Baptists on evangelicalism and local church involvement and also (mostly) on tradition. Yet it was former Catholics, Presbyterians and Salvationists who scored higher than Baptists on freedom. So while some people came from similar denominations, there were others who were attracted because Baptists provided a genuine alternative; however, these were the definite minority.

The report concluded that Victorian Baptists could “expect further strengthening of the evangelical base of the church, the orientation toward contemporary worship, and continuing emphasis on involvement at the local level.” Also, it was true that Baptists were “perceived by others as a broadly evangelical and free worship tradition.” (p 21)

## Evaluation of Victoria

The overall result for the Victorians? “[T]here is little to suggest we have appeal to other Christians as a distinctive church with our own unique contribution to make to the body of Christ”! This, coupled with the other consistent result, “extremely low estimation of the importance of associating with other Baptist churches and other Christians in general” (p 24), suggests that Baptists were likely to peter out in lonely and undistinguished termination (p 16).

## Baptists in Australia 1996 (Hughes)

It appears then that Baptists are not very distinctive from other evangelicals. This is also pointed out in another study of Baptists in Australia, this time nationally, *The Baptists in Australia*.<sup>12</sup> In common with the Queensland data, it shows Baptists to be oriented towards a literal and contextual view of the Bible. Similar to the 1991 BUV statement, Hughes also finds statistical data stressing the importance of local church involvement for Baptists (p 57) – 46% vs Catholic 35%, Uniting Church 26%, Anglican 12%. This means, that although Baptists are only a small minority of the population generally (hovering around 1.5 to 2%), they constitute the 4<sup>th</sup> largest group by attendance.

Hughes also confirms the importance of prayer and Bible study (50% vs 33% for Catholic, 22% for Anglican, 26% for Uniting Church) (p 62).

The demographics in Victoria are also confirmed by Hughes, who links the importance of personal behaviour, Bible study and church involvement with the higher educational and professional levels found amongst Baptists (p 78).

He concluded that the lack of decline in church attendance for Baptists in comparison with others suggests that the above characteristics mean that Baptist life may be more in harmony with modern life styles. However, it is not the traditional BAPTIST distinctives that predominate, but it seems that it is the averaged-out characteristics of broad evangelicalism and the opportunity to find meaningful involvement in a contemporary form of church that are attractive.

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<sup>12</sup> Philip J Hughes, *The Baptists in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996)

## **Australian Baptists 2006 (compared with 2001)**

We also have figures from a decade later, the NCLS data for Australian Baptists nationally in 2006. The most valued feature of Baptist life by a large margin was Bible preaching and teaching at 50%, although it had been even more strongly affirmed in 2001. Next down the list at 35% was Bible study and prayer groups, stronger than 2001, followed not far after by contemporary worship at 30% (which had also declined since 2001). Appreciation of Communion and outreach came in much lower at 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, both worse than earlier. However, Australian Baptists overall felt that they were growing in their faith and enjoyed a sense of belonging to the local church, both more in 2006 than 2001, and exceeding other denominations at least by a small measure. They were stronger in sharing their faith (although less so than in 2001) but were outclassed by Pentecostals, Salvation Army and the Churches of Christ. They attracted more people from other churches and handled newcomers better than earlier, and better than mainline denominations, but they were far behind the Pentecostals.

## ***Overall evaluation of Australia***

We are awaiting the 2011 NCLS figures and the full details of 2011 Census<sup>13</sup>, but the foregoing seems to indicate that Australian Baptists believe they are growing in their faith, and appreciate good biblical teaching and have a focus on the local church where they have been successful in attracting and retaining attendees. Although they are committed to personal evangelism and outreach, they are not necessarily greatly successful at it. The trend towards contemporary worship may have passed its peak, and Communion is still not a key focus. Unfortunately, there is no NCLS data about attitudes to baptism.

Put in terms of our BAPTIST distinctives, we can say that the idea of a spiritually active (if not regenerative) membership is still prominent, as is biblical authority. The focus on the local church has improved from an earlier period, while evangelism may be honoured in theory but not in practice – both characteristics being perhaps reflective of prevailing conditions.

These features do not yield much in terms of measurable differences in characteristically Baptist areas. There is a strong tendency for these characteristics to be shared with other evangelic churches (and in cases exceeded by them) but there is certainly a strong distinction from mainline churches. Thus we can speak of a baptistic grouping of churches.

We are not able to investigate some other BAPTIST distinctives such as church government or baptism because the statistical data used above does not touch on these areas. While some people may consider these and related areas as merely pragmatic and organisational concerns, I think that we need to take seriously the fully integrated approach to Baptist distinctives that I referred to in my 2011 paper, viz, “It is important to note that the baptism of believers is not a simple, detachable belief in a list of several but represents the intersection of several different convictions, each of which leads to it.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Initial results show that Australian Baptists have reversed an earlier decline in terms of their percentage of the population (now 1.64% compared with 1.60%) and Queensland Baptists have jumped to 2.01% from 1.87%, making them the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest groups of Baptists (after New South Wales). The greatest percentage is in the Northern Territory and the lowest in the Australian Capital Territory. They rank 6<sup>th</sup> nationally and 5<sup>th</sup> for the state in size of church constituency.

<sup>14</sup> S. Mark Heim, ‘Baptismal recognition and the Baptist Churches’ in Michael Root and Risto Saarinen (editors), *Baptism and the Unity of the Church* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 156.

## Other statistical data

The foregoing represents a sample of how the use of statistical data can help to understand and pinpoint Baptist identity today. However, it is only a sampling from one geographic area, with all the limitations of such a process. So I would like to be able to replicate it from many other areas. I understand that there are some possibilities in other parts of the English speaking world but I was not able to make much progress, and invite others to take up the task.<sup>15</sup>

## Hunt (Scotland)

Thanks to HIC member, Rev Brian Talbot, I did obtain some sophisticated statistical material from Scotland, but it was early and only related minimally to my project. It was prepared by Rev David Hunt in 1997. With a strong scientific and statistical background, he was able to analyse baptism and membership statistics and trends for lengthy periods (nearly a century) and for the current year or two; his work covered the denomination (Baptist Union of Scotland, BUS) and local church situations.

More than half of respondents said becoming a Christian was a process (56%) rather than taking place at a particular time (36%). Most had been in contact with a church, Sunday school or other Christian group in the lead-up, and said that “a Christian friend” was the “main” influencer (38%) with their own pastor next (14%); the same order was true when “other” influencers were also taken into account (54%, 45%). The largest group (22%) reported being baptised after a delay of 6 to 12 months, and none were baptised within a few weeks or immediately. (Another 22% said the delay was 10+ years, but possibly these were converted at a young age.)

In 1997, BUS churches reported around 2 baptisms per annum each on average, but about half of the churches had none, and 10% none for the previous 4 years or more. The main reasons for deciding on baptism were obedience to Christ’s command (70%) and public profession of faith (41%) but only 5% mentioned church membership, although this figured more strongly as a secondary reason (40%). Personal spiritual growth gained only 2.8% support. Public declaration of faith was the strongest response for the “main idea expressed in baptism” (33%) but “identification with Christ” was also well supported (23%), but when secondary ideas were included, celebration of the new life and repentance/renunciation scored higher (both at 45% vs 41% which was the same as cleansing from sin). Reception of the Holy Spirit was only 27%, but surprisingly, “incorporation into the church” (46%) only slightly less than public declaration of faith (47%).

About 85% of those baptised had become church members (in some about 2/3rds of the churches it was 100%). The most common reason given for not joining the church was that it was left to the individual, indicating in Hunt’s opinion a lack of teaching on the relation between baptism and church membership, which is backed up by the most common reasons given for not joining the church upon baptism – “did not think about [it]” and “procrastination”. The retention rate over 5 years was almost 70% with a further 7% having moved to another church and another 2% otherwise accounted for. The most common reason for the falling away was that the person had lapsed. Most people had received pre-baptismal instruction, but only 23% received any post-baptismal teaching, half of which did so by joining an already existing group in the church.

This collection of data indicates that baptism was strongly held and practiced but teaching about it and pastoral care were somewhat deficient. It was also considered to be mostly a personal matter.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Sutherland, *Conflict and Connection: Baptist Identity in New Zealand* (Auckland: Archer Press, 2011) pp 249ff, makes reference to NZ government census and church survey data and draws some conclusions about Baptist identity from this material, but I do not have access to the raw figures.

<sup>16</sup> Details taken from David Hunt’s papers dated 1997 and published by Hamilton Baptist Church: *What’s Going On In The Churches? A Survey of Baptisms in Scottish Baptist Churches*, and *Journey to Faith: A Survey of People baptized in Scottish Baptist Churches June 1996 – May 1997*. See also his other papers: *Seeing Ourselves as We Are: A look at the Baptist Union of Scotland Statistics for 1996*; *Reflecting On Our Past: A Statistical Look at Baptists in Scotland 1892-1997* and *Learning from the Past – Planning for the Future – a statistical look at Hamilton Baptist Church, 1900-1997*.

## General Histories and Articles

Another useful although somewhat limited source would be evaluations of Baptists by non-Baptist authors or publishers, such as might be found in dictionaries and encyclopaedias and general church histories of various nations and regions which refer to Baptists. For example, a cursory scanning of US church histories<sup>17</sup> reveals that Baptists are mentioned in regard to such topics as slavery, revival, education, church/state relations, anti-intellectualism and foreign missions, and their organisational flexibility in frontier situations was a key factor in their growth.

### Asia

A simple example of regional survey is *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (edited by Scott W Sunquist, Eerdmans, 2001) which devotes nearly 8 pages of text to Baptists (pp. 58-66). Most of the material is purely historical and the balance between the different countries is uneven (eg India gets a column, Bangladesh and Philippines a short paragraph each, but Myanmar gets nearly six columns).

The missionary zeal of local and expatriate Baptists is of course noted, as the Baptist witness has been planted in so many countries, often at a quite early stage, India being so well known. However, it is also observed that the progress of Baptist work amongst animists has often been more substantial than amongst the established religions of Hinduism (except in some cases among the Dalits), Buddhism and Islam. Overall, the most general contributions to the community seem to have been in the area of medical services, education, and language and literature. On the surface, these might only reflect characteristic missionary zeal, but it does also signify a Baptist concern with holistic service and a social ethic that sees the value of the human person and society in the Kingdom of God. This is a characteristic that is not easily to be found in the traditional list of distinctives, although it is by no means absent from the Baptist life and witness.

### Encyclopaedias

The *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* (2:77 (2003)) simply describes Baptists as Protestant churches which are congregational in ecclesiastical polity, they exhibit great range of theological orientations, and have a strong emphasis on autonomy and diversity.

There is a slightly more information in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*<sup>18</sup> Although this article was written by a prominent Baptist historian, because of the nature of the book in which it appears, we can take it as a more or less non-sectarian or objective description. Baptists are identified in summary (p 66) as Christians who subscribe to voluntarism, who are pietistic in spirituality, practicing evangelism and are “sectarian” in ecclesiastical polity, which means that they are, sociologically of the “sect” type, rather than “church” type. Here we see some of the traditional Baptist distinctives, even if in a generalised form – such as local church autonomy, regeneration, personal faith and evangelism.

A less objective account may be expected from *An Encyclopaedia of Christianity*.<sup>19</sup> The article on the Baptists is by N Burnett Magender and Edward H Overby (independent Baptists?). It offers a brief characterisation which focuses only on the Baptist distinctive of religious freedom (personal and at church level – which is described as a “personalised Calvinism”), concluding that it is drawn from a position of faith (presumably rather than from some philosophical, legal or humanitarian foundation). Not surprisingly, the writers also urge Baptists to avoid trends towards ecclesiastical conformity and institutional orthodoxy.

A wider range of characteristics is found in *The Encyclopaedia of Christianity*<sup>20</sup>, in an article attributed to “Eduard Schutz with ES Gauston”. It refers (p 199) to their social status, attitudes on separation of church and state, activities in mission and evangelism, concern for children shown through extensive Christian education programs, the importance of worship, and key role of the local church.

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<sup>17</sup> For example, Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

<sup>18</sup> Edited by Mircea Eliade (Macmillan, NY, 1987); article, ‘Baptist Churches’ by Edwin S. Gauston (University of California) 2:63-66.

<sup>19</sup> Edited by E H Palmer, National Foundation for Christian Education, Wilmington, Delaware, 1964, 1:565.

<sup>20</sup> ET 1999, Eerdmans/Brill, 1:197-200.

# Baptist Surveys

## *Leonard (North America)*

I have referred at the outset to Bill Leonard's pessimism about alternatives to Baptist diversity.<sup>21</sup> He deals with "questions of identity . . . [a]t a time when much Baptist identity worldwide is in a state of permanent transition." (p ii). He suggests that one way of clarifying the variety that exists is to see the differences not as merely random but as dialectical responses to certain key issues. Thus he identifies eight areas where these dialectical positions have been held by Baptists in various times or localities (pp 6-9).

A clear example relates to the local church, where the attitude varies between local autonomy and associational cooperation; another is polarisation over the ministry, whether it be by laity or by clergy; on the personal level, regeneration may be taken as a dramatic event or a sustaining process. The other areas are the place of Scripture (its authority vs liberty of conscience), the ordinances (sacrament/symbol), doctrinal statements (confessional/creedal), religious liberty vs Christian citizenship, and more generally, theological and ecclesial diversity.

It may seem that this paints a picture of severe and hopeless diversity (a point which, as we have mentioned, Leonard mentions frequently), but on the last page of the book, he does concede that in all his extensive research for the book (covering the entire gamut of Baptist history) he discovered "certain common marks" that seem endemic to Baptist individuality". These are 12 in number (plus a final one on diversity), which can be stated as follows:

God as creator and judge of all; Jesus Christ as saviour and Lord and the necessity of personal faith within the fellowship of the church; the ordinances as symbols of Christ's saving work; the authority of the Scripture and ability of people to interpret it by the aid of the Spirit and within the church community; religious freedom and the right of private interpretation.

We can summarise these findings further by saying that Baptists remain within the orthodox Christian position regarding the godhead and within the free church tradition regarding the church; they subscribe to biblical authority, they are evangelical in piety; and they are passionate about religious freedom. It is within these boundaries then that Leonard's "dialectical" variations occur, sometimes getting out of hand but often held within a creative tension. For Leonard, it seems that the diversity that occurs is the result of the "endemic" "common marks" (especially religious freedom and the consequent need for dissent which is "a worthy and dangerous pursuit" (p 424). So there is no escape from this diversity, because as Leonard puts it in his closing words, "That is the way it is" (p 425). So as Leonard noted at the beginning, although there are many variations, they do exist within the framework of certain "distinctives" (p ii).

We could now turn to some other surveys of Baptists to examine the distinctive Baptist characteristics as reported by their authors.

## *Randall (Europe)*

Our HIC member, Ian Randall has presented some helpful information on the European scene, which is based on the formative periods of Baptist life but also with an eye to the contemporary period. The presentation made at the European Baptist Federation 400<sup>th</sup> celebration in Amsterdam in July 2009 was perhaps the more traditional approach with a long list of characteristics (baptism; the church; religious freedom; debate and diversity; evangelism; social action; gifted leaders; crossing of borders; a varied people; the role of the Bible; churches and interdependence.<sup>22</sup> However in another article covering the same ground, the presentation is briefer and more dynamic. He describes Baptists in terms of people 'Reading the Bible, Living the life, Nurturing the community, Redeeming the powers, and Telling the story.' While he refers to these as distinctive characteristics "emerging from formative periods in the Baptist story in Europe", they are capable of being contemporarised, and as such providing further insights to our quest.<sup>23</sup>

Study and analysis of other samples of Baptist writing along the same lines from various locations should provide a more reliable picture of Baptists in terms of actual characteristics.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways: a history* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> See Ian Randall, "Communities of Conviction", Spurgeon's College London, as presented to the European Baptist Federation celebration of 400 years of Baptist life, Amsterdam July 24-26, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> 'Tracing Baptist theological Foot Prints: A European Perspective' by Ian Randall, *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2009), 133-48.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., on NZ, see Martin Sutherland, *Conflict and Connection: Baptist Identity in New Zealand* (Auckland: Archer Press, 2011).



### III Vision and Promotional Material

The empirical data discussed above yields some helpful insights about the nature of Baptist churches today. These are samples only to test the methodology and to yield whatever interim results are possible, with the hope that a wider and more balanced range of sources could be used to improve the quality of the results. However, before summarising our findings, there is another source of information we can use, although it is less objective than the foregoing.

I am referring to promotional material issued by churches and denominations themselves, such as found in printed documents like visitors' welcome brochures, formal reports containing vision statements, and particularly church web pages. Although it is not objective material from an unbiased observer, it does reflect the current realities of the church rather than traditional or historical characteristics, and as such, can provide us with a picture of the church and the image it wishes to project.

I referred to some of this material in my earlier paper, so now to another convenient set of examples – local church websites. Due to the huge number of these, I have looked more or less randomly at some from different parts of the world as samples and with the purpose of getting an overall feel of the material. As this procedure is less authoritative than that followed in the earlier sections of this paper, I have not tried to document every case, but instead offer a somewhat informal overview. (Readers of this paper may wish to carry out their own website search and compare their findings with mine.) The characteristics reported here are typical of many churches, but not necessarily always distinctive of Baptist churches per se, and nor are they necessarily unique to Baptists.

#### *Four Particular Categories*

The range is interesting, and I mention four types in particular. The **first** is the strongly conservative, “**fundamentalist**” group of churches which stress biblical authority (usually in a highly literal form, often in terms of the King James version), the doctrine of separation and local church autonomy, personal evangelism and missions. These often use the BAPTIST mnemonic in specific and definite terms or something very similar.

The **second** category I mention are the **Reformed/Calvinistic** churches which refer to the 1689 Confession as their basis. They overlap a little with the first category in their conservative nature, but are more concerned with adherence to the Calvinistic theology of the Confession as the distinctive, even exclusive, Baptist tradition as a reaction to other theological (and general) pressures which they believe have taken other Baptists in different directions. The first group would be more biblicistic drawing upon their view of the literal verbal inspiration of Scripture.

The **third** group which I noticed was the **charismatic** (even Apostolic) which depend on forceful authoritative leaders who have either created their particular church from the beginning or have been instrumental in building it in its present shape, usually as a large, complex and active organisation. While today these are often thought of in relation to the contemporary “super-church” movement, which may also be Charismatic (or Pentecostal) in doctrine and structure, it ought to be borne in mind that in the past, well before this movement appeared, there were powerful pastors of Baptist and independent Bible churches who built large churches through the force of their own leadership and abilities. I believe there is need for a lot more study of these earlier super-churches and their “apostles” in relation to our topic.

The **final** category consists of unpretentious “**Bible**” churches which do not depend much on outside sources, and do not have any strong links to others. Instead, they are simply concerned to be a Bible-believing, non-creedal church in a local area helping their people to live a sincere Christian life, and providing them with the organisational framework for worship, evangelism, missions and service. They are often independent churches with only informal or low key links to other churches or associations, and may therefore fall into the category of baptistic churches mentioned earlier.

In addition to these four particular types, there are of course many churches which have retained the traditional Baptist structures and principles, and continue to implement them with a greater or less degree of success and satisfaction. As we are looking here at new developments and differences from the norm, we will take the characteristics of these churches as a group for granted.

#### *Evaluation*

The first two categories tend to be characterised by their conservative theological and doctrinal loyalties which are well known and do not contribute very much to our present purpose. The churches of the third and fourth categories are not controlled by prior or traditional commitments but have shaped themselves according to their vision of the role of the church and their understanding of the Christian life, which makes them of more interest to our present quest. Their on-line presentations reveal some common features.

They stress the lordship of Christ as the controlling guide for the church and the individual, and the consequent necessity of personal and corporate discipleship. This discipleship and church membership (even if informal) are closely related, and may be summed up in this way:

*if, as a dedicated, born-again believer, you are part of this church, you are expected to be actively involved in its worship, prayer and Bible study, witness, missionary work and service.*

Every effort is made to evangelise people and there is a strong emphasis on training Christians to become involved in the ministry and mission of the church.

In this sense, it is a “believer’s church” and the entire program of the church is oriented around this assumption. This can be interpreted as a form of the doctrine of the Priesthood of Believers. Some churches have a rigorous procedure for baptism and church membership to ensure a high standard, while others are more relaxed, even to the point of making these seem like optional extras. However, overall, there is a strong emphasis on the church as a place where people are incorporated into the body of Christ and within which they exercise their ministry and witness.

Despite the assumption that those involved in the church will be active in their Christian discipleship and ministry, in terms of governance, many of these churches look like a business enterprise or corporation, with the members as clients or customers holding a loyalty-card, or at best, something like share-holders. Typically, there is a senior pastor who acts as a CEO assisted by a pastoral staff, often elders as well, with a Board or a council, and a full set of vision and mission statements, job descriptions, review procedures, reporting systems and administrative support. This form of structure departs substantially from the traditional BAPTIST position of pastor/deacons with church members’ meetings. If it is not purely secular in form, then it could best be described as (small p) “presbyterian” because of the power of pastor and senior lay leaders. It is certainly not the normal historical (capital P) “Presbyterian” which provides checks and balances through its system of higher church courts, and is, at least nominally, confessionally based. It does not refer to any of the Reformed theology that churches in Group 2 use to justify their system of Eldership.

The modern “presbyterian Baptist” church is at its worst when the (rarely called) members’ meeting has little option but to endorse the wishes of the Pastor and Board which are themselves accountable to nobody. It can be better - when the leadership is responsive to the people, empowering and deeply spiritual in nature.

The organisational structure of the Baptist church involving both the traditional role of pastor/deacons and members’ meeting and congregational government is an area which requires further study in the context of our present quest. For those who follow the BAPTIST approach, there is of course no question, but it is not so for others. Sutherland notes that a century ago for one leading New Zealand Baptist, “The doctrine of Believers’ Baptism is only accidentally joined to a Congregational form of church government.” Many Baptists today take the same pragmatic approach, agreeing that “that the wedding [between the two] is a mistake, and that there must be a divorce, if we are to overtake our opportunities in this colony.”<sup>25</sup> However, there may be more profound factors to consider.

## **Sample**

One interesting sample of a modern approach to church life comes from Manukau City Baptist Church in suburban Auckland, New Zealand (which was formerly known as Papatoetoe Baptist Church or “pap Bap”). Its web site (<http://www.citybaptist.org.nz/membership.htm> 29 May 2012) advises that for those who have become “part of our church”, they would “love to formally recognise that commitment and celebrate it! It may sound funny, but to us it is a big deal that you make our church your church!” It goes on to explain that as well as welcoming visitors to the church, “we also have a process where your commitment to Manukau City Baptist formally recognised. There are responsibilities and privileges associated with this commitment, but most of all we see it as a celebration of a full commitment to your local church.” So people who want to take this step are invited to download the material, work through and then submit it to the church.

The material consists of a detailed 56 page document, called ‘Formalising your commitment’, which includes explanations about the life and structure of the church, as well as an exposition of its vision, and self-study Bible material complete with questions and places for answers; finally, there is a form to submit applying for church membership. After submitting the form, the membership process then involves discussions with the pastor or other church leader to confirm the applicant’s desires, and finally the celebration of the act of joining the church.

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Sutherland, *Conflict and Connection: Baptist Identity in New Zealand* (Auckland: Archer Press, 2011), 118.

The document reveals that the church is “presbyterian”, with the overall leadership and responsibility being taken by the elders, to whom the pastor is responsible; the role of the members’ meeting is restricted to certain major items, with day to day management in the hands of staff under the oversight of the elders. The doctrinal statement is extremely brief and traditional; it is weak on ecclesiology and omits any reference to baptism or communion. However, the nature of the church and the Christian life is more fully explained in the document under the mnemonic, 5 Gs – Grace, Growth, Group, Gifts and Giving, which are referred to as “biblical” and ideas that “effectively summarise the essential ‘marks’ of someone devoted to Christ and His Church.” (p 2).

This church appears to be busy and well run, with an active membership and successful; it intends to be biblical and spiritual. In contrast with many churches, it places great emphasis on importance of becoming a church member, and makes it clear that members have obligations support the church and to develop their own spiritual lives. These rather more traditional emphases are maintained in spite of the fact that the church is ‘modern’ in its operations, structure and governance. However, the documentation at least does not eliminate the feeling that the original Baptist sense of a “fellowship of believers” has been replaced by a corporate ethos; there is no reference on the website to any association with other churches. This puts in danger some of the most important aspects of the formative Baptist identity.

Clearly this approach is not satisfactory and so the conclusion is that the search is still on for the model of a large church which can preserve the founding Baptist experience of the gathered fellowship and the natural extension of this to association with other churches. Martin Sutherland, for example, discusses this issue in the New Zealand context as it has affected the denominational organisation, citing the influence of Paul Borden (American Baptist Churches of the West). He quotes Brian Winslade who stated the Borden vision in these terms,

[T]he role of the denomination ... is less like a “family of churches” and more akin to a true “para-church” agency working alongside those with vision and commitment to be the people God calls us to be.<sup>26</sup>

Winslade served as leader of both the Baptist Union of Australia and strongly promulgated these and related views.<sup>27</sup> However, this line of approach has not gone unchallenged.<sup>28</sup>

## ***Summation (BAPTIST)***

In these churches, the traditional characteristics have been preserved in part. We have noted how they display a form of the traditional “Priesthood of All Believers” and it is clear that they are evangelical and evangelistic in character, and seek to be biblically based. The two ordinances are practised but usually in a routine way and in a Zwinglian manner. However, we have also seen that the idea of the two officers in the local church and the traditional structure of pastor/deacons/members’ meetings have been abandoned.

Few of them show much interest in associating with other churches or organisations (and if so, on narrow terms) – in fact, a common accusation of many of these churches is that they place a premium on building their own empires. So it is a case of the autonomy of the local church gone to the extreme.

Similarly, there is a strong presumption in favour of the separation of church and state, although the larger the organisation and therefore the more property and staff, the more likely it is to become enmeshed in governmental regulation and bureaucracy; furthermore, the larger it becomes the more social and political pressure it is able to wield. While there is also an assumption in favour of the classic understanding of soul and religious freedom, in practice the authoritarian tendencies occasionally present may place a question mark over the practice of these important doctrines.

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Sutherland *Conflict and Connection: Baptist Identity in New Zealand* (Auckland: Archer Press, 2011), 247.

<sup>27</sup> See his, *A New Kind of Baptist Church: reframing congregational government* (Macquarie Park, NSW: Morling Press, 2010) and a shorter paper available at

[http://www.baptist.org.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/Articles\\_Oct2010/Understanding\\_Congregational\\_Government.pdf](http://www.baptist.org.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/Articles_Oct2010/Understanding_Congregational_Government.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> See Graeme Chatfield (ed.), *Leadership and Baptist Church Governance* (Eastwood: Morling Press, 2005), especially the papers by Derek Tidball and by Les Ball.

## IV Conclusion

### Summary

We are now able to sum up our findings from the two parts of this project (the statistic surveys and the church's web pages). This is an overall generalisation of what may be true of a typical church.

- The church is evangelical, pietistic and conversionist; there is at least some sense of personal religious experience which is the defining factor for the personal life and involvement in the church and the essential nature of the church
- This pietistic experience is Christ-focused
- The authority is Scripture, however that may be worked out in practice; that is, it is the Bible that is intended to govern, not creeds, synods, church law or reason, but hermeneutics is an issue, and there are many cultural and personal factors at play
- Believers' baptism is practiced rather than other forms, although in many cases it is optional, and even where it is given greater emphasis, its Zwinglian nature makes it seem routine and ritualistic; the same applies to Communion
- The foregoing points imply that it is a believers' church rather than a nominal or state one. It means that it is an activist church, with the expectation that members and adherents are to be intentionally involved in its life through participation in its fellowship, worship and mission
- The church exists for mission, which means there is a commitment to conversionist evangelism, but there is a danger that where a corporate model of the church is in place, evangelism and baptism for membership may be transmuted into recruitment for the interests of corporate success rather than for spiritual reasons.
- There is at least a formal acknowledgement of congregational government but in churches using the corporate model, it has been seriously compromised it is more correct to refer to little-p presbyterian government.
- There is a virtually unchallenged and un-qualified view of the autonomy of the local church.
- In regard to the local church, its governance and relations with others is not now a matter of outside interference by crown, bishop, or synod, but its unfettered independence and relationship of leaders to people.

In addition to these characteristics which may be described as a transmuted form of the traditional BAPTIST distinctives (**B**eliever's baptism, **A**utonomy of the local church, **P**riesthood of all believers, **T**wo officers of pastor and deacon, **I**ndependent soul liberty, **S**aved and regenerate church membership, **T**wo ordinances of baptism and Lord's Supper), we can comment in particular on the distinctive which seems to be typical of American Baptists, viz, freedom. A good example is Shurden's *The Baptist Identity*, which is subtitled "four fragile freedoms" – Bible freedom, soul freedom, church freedom, and religious freedom.

This characteristic is generally quite prominent in the present scene, in fact, to such a degree in many cases that we might speak of "freedom on steroids" which has gone almost to the point of irresponsibility – the churches and their members want to be free of the past, of denominational alliances (except where they need help!) and of all the heavy pietistic traditions that they regard as hampering their church and their own personal spiritual lives. However, "freedom" itself in this context is a *formal* principle without content or direction. Although Shurden does provide plenty of substantive content, a more satisfactory approach would give prominence to the *material* principle, and speak of freedom to follow Christ in genuine and heartfelt discipleship, informed by the Spirit speaking through Scripture, without being hampered by inimical tradition, structures or authorities.

As our chair, Rev Dr Craig Sherouse, put it recently,

What I have experienced and discovered in an international setting is that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is the core of our 21st century global Baptist identity. More than our shared history; more than how much water we use, where we put it and who we put it on; more than the Bible or congregationalism, or freedom or any of the other distinctives we might list. The BWA's Vision Statement says it about as well as it can be said: "The BWA is a global movement of Baptists sharing a common confession of faith in Jesus Christ . . . ."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "The Baptist World Alliance and a 21st Century Global Baptist Identity." A Presentation to the Virginia Baptist Historical Society May 22, 2012 Second Baptist Church

We can focus this even more by reference to traditional Baptist distinctives – the personal and corporate freedom to believe that “salvation is by faith in Christ alone. No sacrament can save. Baptism is the confession of faith when that faith is reached. ... Baptism [is] the most radiant thing in the world. It is the first act of a new convert.”<sup>30</sup>

## Results

We conclude by suggesting that the methodology used in the paper is worth pursuing and the results obtained so far are promising albeit tentative. More work is needed in the areas of data, methodology and evaluation.

The overall conclusion is that since the traditional BAPTIST distinctives have been transmuted, the Baptist “brand” is not so distinctive as before.

One reason for this is the inevitable broadening of the stream, caused to some extent by the lessening influence of traditional forces, especially denominational structures. As Nancy Ammerman has pointed out,

Baptist theologizing has been done by the same structures that did our other functional tasks for us. We have depended on study course books and Sunday School lessons and (sometimes) seminary professors and traveling evangelists to do our theology for us, to tell us what it means to be Baptist. Because those denominational structures are no longer strong, we feel as if we are losing our sense of theological identity, as well as our ability to do what we need today.<sup>31</sup>

This process may be seen as a loss because the keepers of the traditional vision have been sidelined, but it also means that local churches have a new opportunity to find their own way. As Ammerman puts it,

It seems to me, however, that one of the salutary effects of the demise of the old institutions may be a new freedom for theology to happen in a truly Baptist way. I think we may find our identity reemerging out of all the places where people are asking about and living out what it means to be Baptist. .... If we no longer have a dependable staff of paid theological experts, we may have to go back to finding our theology among the ordinary “priests” who freely choose to commit themselves to being a part of the Baptist way.<sup>32</sup>

This of course means that questions are now raised about the role of denominational leaders (and similarly for local church leaders). Some have already abandoned their traditional roles and accepted a lesser one, and in the process changed the function of the denomination in relation to the local church. However, this is not necessarily a serious loss, because, as the article in *An Encyclopaedia of Christianity* (1:565) points out, “the massive weight of an institutional structure is a relatively new phenomenon in Baptist history.” So Baptists do not necessarily need a denominational infrastructure but what it does mean is that the exact role of the “new” denomination needs be clarified in the context of the particular Baptist understanding of associationism. It should not be forgotten that there are similarities between the role of local church leaders and structures and those at the denominational level so this is a bigger and more important question than might at first seem to be the case.

Another important reason for changes to the traditional Baptist distinctives is the changing context. As Blake Killingsworth pointed out<sup>33</sup> the formative characteristics of the Baptists were closely related to the socio-political and ecclesiastical contexts in which the movement emerged. Martin Sutherland has explored how Baptists had to discover a new identity in colonial New Zealand where the context was considerably different from what the pioneers had originally experienced in UK, especially as “dissenters” and “non-conformist”.<sup>34</sup> So there are likely to be many differences in the shape of Baptist life in different parts of the world, but there will also be many family resemblances where the same the driving force of the Baptist vision works itself out in the face of the differing challenges.

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<sup>30</sup> Quoting J J North of New Zealand, in Martin Sutherland, *Conflict and Connection: Baptist Identity in New Zealand* (Auckland: Archer Press, 2011), 144f.

<sup>31</sup> “Congregation and Association” in *Baptists in the Balance: The tension between freedom and responsibility* edited by Everett C Goodwin, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1997), 270.

<sup>32</sup> “Congregation and Association” in *Baptists in the Balance: The tension between freedom and responsibility*, edited by Everett C Goodwin, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1997, 270.

<sup>33</sup> “Themes and Tensions from 400 Years of Baptist History”, BWA Congress, Honolulu, 2012 <http://www.bwa-baptist-heritage.org/haw-Killingsworth-Themes.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Sutherland, *Conflict and Connection: Baptist Identity in New Zealand* (Auckland: Archer Press, 2011), 9.

A further reason for the changes is related to Marty's idea of the "baptistification" of other churches, especially in relation to the distinctiveness of Baptists. They will be no longer so different from others, and so there will be a broader range of groups to consider and there will be the possibility of new alignments. The situation will not be so clear cut as in the hey-day of denominations.

The overall result of the current developments is that churches and individuals need to work from first principles again to define their foundations, nature and goals as believers committed to the lordship of Christ and the empowering of the Spirit.

In particular, considerable work now needs to be done on the theology and practice of the baptism and communion, the relationship between Baptist theology and congregational government, and on the nature of associationism or more broadly, Baptists and their relations with other Christians.

This is no doubt likely to be a messy procedure, as several commentators have observed, but in contrast with the traditional "hand me down" denominationalism which many now seem to have abandoned, it is likely to be more authentically Baptist, if it succeeds!

END

# Identifying the Baptist DNA - Global Baptist Identity

## Part 3 - July 2013

Paper for BWA Heritage and Identity Commission, July 2013

by David Parker, Brisbane, Australia 4 June 2013

### I Introduction

This paper is a follow-up to my two previous presentations in which I made some proposals about how to deal with the contentious and slippery problem of understanding global Baptist identity. Believing that this is an important although somewhat neglected part of our brief as the “Heritage and Identity” Commission of the BWA, I suggested that we adopt an empirical approach to avoid the log-jam represented by the traditional approach to Baptist distinctives, which can be typically referred to by the acrostic BAPTIST. (BAPTIST - Bible, Autonomy, Priesthood of All believers, Two Sacraments, Independence, Soul freedom etc, Two leaders)

In other words, we need to find a way of understanding the precise nature of the movement and then identify the driving force which brought the Baptist movement into being in the first place and has sustained it to the present. The assumption is that any movement such as the Baptists needs a coherent principle to maintain itself; if there is none, then the movement dies and disappears. But if it remains, those who are part of the movement need to understand it in a valid and helpful way. That I see is an important part of the reason for the existence of an “identity” element in the charter of our BWA Commission.

My 2011 paper examined many factors related to the traditional historical distinctives (represented by BAPTIST), emphasising the difficulties currently faced by that approach. Then I proposed that we should adopt multiple ways of understanding Baptist identity apart from the traditional historical markers, especially empirical or descriptive approaches.

First of all I suggested that we should examine **identity and core value statements** as a way of identifying what Baptists thought of themselves and their intentions.

Then another well documented way of examining differences between Baptists and others is to study **ecumenical dialogues**, especially those involving Baptists, but also others. I referred to a summation of these ecumenical findings found in a paper by Dr Ken Manley (Melbourne) to our Commission in 2002 where he gave an overview of official Baptist dialogues up to that time. He concluded the paper by listing some of the key issues for Baptists which they might “consider as they work on the identity question.” These were Authority and Scripture, Ecclesiology, Baptism, Mission, and Ministry. I suggested that this list was a useful pointer of Baptist identity in that ecumenical context.<sup>1</sup>

I focused particularly on the third area, **empirical data** about Baptists, an area in which I believe we can make some progress. I suggested that an objective descriptive approach to actual Baptist life would help us to see what

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<sup>1</sup> Ken R Manley, “A Survey of Baptist World Alliance Conversations with other Churches and some implications for Baptist Identity.” A paper to Joint meeting of Baptist Heritage and Identity Commission and the Doctrine and Interchurch Cooperation Commission, Seville, July, 2002.

characterizes Baptists, and that this might be a more useful approach to learning about their distinctives. I mentioned four different sources for this data – first, statistical data derived from surveys such as the Australian National Church Life Survey; second, reasons given why people choose a Baptist church either to swap from another denomination or to remain where they are when a choice is available; Baptist pathology where certain beliefs and practices are considered to be un-Baptist or even anti-Baptist; and finally, comparative anatomy where Baptists are compared with others, especially those who may be considered close cousins.

I used some **samples** from all of these types in my paper as a trial for my theory about a way to establish a global Baptist identity and as a means of discovering tentative results on what that identity might be. (We even took a survey of delegates attending last year's BWA AG to add to the mix! Hopefully the same might occur again in 2013.)

Following on from this, I had hoped that during the ensuing period of time many other similar sources of empirical data from other places might have been found that would have enabled me to progress further in testing the methodology and refining the results. I invited members of the HIC to assist in this project, and also hoped that publishing the papers on our website might have garnered some interest and feedback. Unfortunately, there has not been the kind of progress I anticipated.

One particular promising opportunity for a survey was presented to us during last year's session, It involved the inclusion of some appropriate questions in a large survey of Baptist church life being conducted by **Baylor University**. This would have provided us with a great deal of very useful data from a wide range of Baptist churches. (*The questions we submitted for this survey are listed at the end of this document.*) However, we are sorry to say that there has apparently been no progress on this survey at this time. This means that I am not able to report anything from it and so cannot advance the project from that direction.

So in this short paper, I am presenting some other data which I have found, and I am also making a few more observations. First I want to follow up on one of the examples that I used last year – the National Church Life Survey results from my own home state of Queensland, Australia. (Please refer to last year's paper for the details).

## II Up-dates

### ***NCLS – Baptists in Queensland 2011***

Since last year, the results of the quinquennial NCLS survey taken in 2011 have been released. So now we can compare these with the earlier data that I reported last year. (The 2011 results also have comparisons with the two previous surveys which gives a handy guide to the trends; they also have comparisons with the overall Australian Baptist average and with the other major denominations.)

The 2011 results show that for Queensland Baptists, there was still a lot of growth from switchers and transfers (more than most other denominations) but not so much from new conversions and outreach. Outreach was 7<sup>th</sup> in order of most valued features of the life of the church, and personal sharing of faith declined steadily over a 10 year period. Baptists were no different from the average in attracting newcomers and youth. So Queensland Baptists could hardly be described as strongly evangelistic, even though they still preferred the term “evangelical” to describe their beliefs, with “Pentecostal” chosen by a significant minority.

There was a good sense of belonging to the local church. Appreciation of sermons and Bible studies was high on the list (although not as popular as before) but there was not a great deal of confidence that there had been much growth in faith – certainly no more than for the overall average of all churches. Communion/Lord's Supper was well down



the list of features appreciated by the average member. Leaders were less likely now to encourage members to use their gifts in ministry than earlier, so the concept of the priesthood of all believers was in danger. In terms of the church as a fellowship of believers, the results were mediocre. Worship, on the other hand, was considered inspiring by a fair majority (with a bias towards contemporary forms), a figure that had grown steadily over the decade.

Although I have given a somewhat impressionistic evaluation (which needs more detailed study), the overall situation is that there is plenty of evidence of activity and growth at least in certain areas. However there is still nothing to suggest that the denomination is distinctive as a “Baptist” group, thus reinforcing our conclusion that Baptist identity is in a process of transmutation to a generic Bible-based evangelical church. This means that in Australia at least Baptists are positioned as somewhere in the middle between the liturgical, sacramental churches on the one hand, and the more radical charismatic and independent churches on the other, thus accounting for the relatively high number of people switching to it.

## ***New Zealand***

I can also add a brief observation to a book I mentioned last year which carries the subtitle, “Baptist Identity in New Zealand.” It is Martin Sutherland’s *Conflict and Connection* (Auckland: Archer Press, 2011). In this book, Sutherland gives numerous examples of conflict involving individuals, churches and the denomination, showing that this has been a long-standing and continuing feature of the Baptist scene in NZ. Towards the end of the book, he argues that attempts to cover conflict up or ignore it have been futile and counterproductive, and that when it has been faced realistically, it has resulted in growth and development.

At first, this is a startling picture, and prompts the question: is conflict such a regular and prominent part of the Baptist scene? Surely that cannot be true for my own area? Further reflection on our history, of course, makes it clear that there has been plenty of controversy here as well! So does this mean we have to add a “C” to our BAPTIST mnemonic? Surely to have “conflict” as part of our identity is not a good advertisement for a church which supposed to be based on the great commandments to love God and love each other!

But further thought of course reveals that conflict is not necessarily sin per se. It can be simply the fact that people with all their (God-given) differences see matters differently, and that they have every right to do so! So conflict ought to be acknowledged and dealt with positively. The presence of conflict (or shall we say, differences of opinion/perspective) and the right of every person and church to have their own viewpoint reflect our beliefs about religious freedom, soul competency, the right of private interpretation of Scripture and the Lordship of Christ. These are all fundamental Baptist beliefs which mean that when Baptists come together we should not be surprised that there are differences of opinion – if fact, we should welcome these differences, and work them out in a positive, God-honouring way.

## **III The Baptist Way**

This leads us to some new sources of data, which are more on the theological than the statistical level (on which more below). Two books which have appeared recently both intentionally take a broad historical and global approach to Baptist identity and so can nicely aid our quest.

### ***Robert Johnson***

Robert E Johnson in *A Global Introduction to Baptist Churches* (CUP, 2010). tackles the very problem we are facing – the increasing diversity of Baptists around the globe, and finds it to be more providential than troublesome.

He points out that once Baptist identity was thought of as purely Anglo-centric (or perhaps Anglo-American) due to the power of the historical and cultural circumstances in which the movement began and first flourished. However, the situation now is quite different, and the global Baptists are “a culturally polycentric movement characterised by elements that are too diverse to permit the movement’s identity to be contained under a single cultural vista.” (page 3)

He therefore explores the Baptist movement historically and globally with the aim of finding “new and more inclusive dimensions for interpreting and presenting Baptists’ histories and identities.” (page 5). His quest arrives at some of the same answers as others, such as the importance of the local church and of the individual, and the need for personal commitment and faith.

However, he adds two more – the first being the importance of contextualising the faith so that it becomes relevant to the local situation. Then, most importantly, with post-modern insights, he suggests that the inclusion of the “other” will “enrich the movement’s self-understanding” and also open the possibility of “making this family of denominations far more relevant for today’s world.” (page 5) He proposes that Baptists, who are already so polycentric, should discover what is “cohesive in diversity” or in other words, develop “the art of forming communities derived in and through difference.” (page 431)

This will of course be a challenge, especially for those still wedded to the Homogeneous Unit Principle so ardently advocated by the Fuller Church Growth School, but it does have a biblical ring to it! Yet it needs to have an overarching vision, not merely difference for difference sake - and that is where the second book helps.

## ***Stephen Holmes***

In *Baptist Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), Stephen Holmes (St Andrews University, Aberdeen) writes as a Baptist in a series of books which cover a variety of Christian traditions, and so fulfils our criteria for a comparative work. He points out that there can be no canonical theology or authority for Baptists and even his own work (as with any other so-called ‘Baptist theology’) can only be a personal view. Nevertheless, he is “acutely conscious that some things feel normal, ‘Baptist’ to me, and other things feel strange and alien.” (page 2)

It is precisely this inner dynamic or Baptist spirit that we are trying to identify and isolate. After exploring a few samples of what this inner spirit or core might be (pages 4-6), Holmes makes his own proposal, which he summarises as, “the immediate Lordship of Christ over every individual human person and over every particular gathered church.” (page 161) His compact and insightful exposition of Baptist theology is effectively organised around this core.

However, Holmes feels that he has not “solved the question of Baptist identity” but concedes that this question “will not be solved for some while” but he does make a strong and attractive case for his view being one of those that when compared with others will be eminently worth pursuing further. After all he says, “[W]hen Smyth baptized himself, and then Helwys, four centuries ago, a movement began that for all its faults and false turns and foibles, has proved repeatedly generative and dynamic.” (page 161) The many achievements of Baptists over this period of time, he says, were “made to happen by people who were living out a vision of how to follow God, a vision which seemed to enable them . . . to dare to believe that the call of Christ” could enable them to achieve great things for the Kingdom of God.

He further claims that this “was and is a vision found in the Bible, but in a particular way of grasping the Bible” such that “[t]o attempt the work of narrating Baptist theology is to attempt the work of identifying that particular way of grasping the Bible.” (page 162) He urges that this process needs to be refined or “purified”, by identifying where we have “failed to be faithful enough to the biblical call” and making the necessary corrections to bring us in

line with the true “vision of Christ-like living.”

This makes it highly important for us to pursue this question of Baptist identity, because “[i]f we can better narrate the Baptist vision, we can better perform this work of diagnosis.” He confesses, “I dare to believe that the Baptist vision is something sufficiently and profoundly right,” and is therefore worth pursuing with all of our energy.

## IV BWA – Dr Craig Sherouse and Dr Neville Callam

I think that Holmes’ approach reinforces the remarks of our **own chairman, Dr Craig Sherouse** which I quoted last year, from a paper he delivered on Baptist identity in the context of the BWA.

What I have experienced and discovered in an international setting is that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is the core of our 21st century global Baptist identity. More than our shared history; more than how much water we use, where we put it and who we put it on; more than the Bible or congregationalism, or freedom or any of the other distinctives we might list. The BWA’s Vision Statement says it about as well as it can be said: “The BWA is a global movement of Baptists sharing a common confession of faith in Jesus Christ . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Also of interest in the response of our General Secretary, **Dr Neville Callam**. I approached him recently asking if he could share any insights about the actual core characteristics of the global Baptist movement today in he perceived them during the course of his travels around the world.

He replied<sup>3</sup> more in personal terms, *especially in view of the very great diversity existing today*, stating that the Baptist position on baptism was “the most faithful to the sacred scriptures of the church.” He explained that he felt there had been considerable progress in recent years in reconciling understandings of believer’s baptism and infant baptism through putting both into the context of initiation into Christ and the church, but that this did not rule out the necessity for our witness to believer’s baptism.

He added that the emphasis on a believer’s church was also a vital part of our understanding, but this did not mean that Baptists were the only ones who held this view. Baptists, he said, should also include a cosmic view of the church (as well local and global), and he supported the efforts of British Baptists in particular in thinking about the “sacramentality of the church.”

Dr Callam expressed some concern about changes in Baptist attitudes towards the necessary of (believer’s) baptism for membership in a church or even for acceptance into the broader community of the church, wondering if this was due to more comprehensive views of initiation or merely lack of conviction about our historic position due to pressures from the secularized world. This pressure has also raised questions about the commitment of Baptists to evangelism and religious freedom.

So for Dr Callam, “Baptist witness to the church as a community of believers, to baptism as a critical step in the process of initiation in Christ and his church, and to the priority of evangelism and social witness are needed as much now as in the past.”

This commitment to our historic denomination principles does not mean we should not be open to positive

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<sup>2</sup> “The Baptist World Alliance and a 21st Century Global Baptist Identity.” A Presentation to the Virginia Baptist Historical Society May 22, 2012 Second Baptist Church; see also *Baptist History and Heritage* 47:3 (2012)

<sup>3</sup> Personal emails, Dr N Callam, 31 May 2013

relationships with other churches, but Dr Callam believes that our “Baptist understanding of the spiritual unity of the church makes it unnecessary for our churches to enter into organizational unity with other churches.” Rather, he believes, the goal should be to work towards a “convergence” of ministries and “reconciled diversity” by means of a “mutual recognition of the reality of the church in each other”. This would help to overcome “the spectre of disunity that mars the church’s witness.”

As for the Baptist family itself, the diversity is so great that it calls for much more effort in discovering “who we are” (and should become). This indicates to me that this current project on a global Baptist identity is certainly worthwhile.

## V Conclusion

We conclude by re-affirming the view that the methodology used in this paper is worth pursuing and the results obtained so far are promising albeit tentative. More work is needed in the areas of data, methodology and evaluation, and we hope that there can be progress in this area in the time to come.

It goes without saying that there is a bewildering variety of Baptist life and expression across the world; it seems to be part of the DNA of Baptists, and certainly there can be no canonical authority to pull it all into order, at least not in the way that organisational experts would like to see.

Therefore the question before us is, what holds us all together as a movement? For some it is merely pragmatism (ie, practical matters such as property, and especially financial considerations); for others, it would be traditional and historical reasons (we were established and supported by Baptists in the past and there is no particular reason to move away from that tradition); for others, it is definitely a matter of principle (we have always been Baptist and believed and practiced in certain ways and we are *not* going to change!). For some it would be a genuine sense of mission (the local, and even associated, Baptist churches can be more useful than others as agents for evangelisation and mission, social service and even political power). For many, however, the “Baptist” name is not much more than a brand or franchise which can be used to advantage but hardly defines them in any particular way and could be easily traded for another if there were some perceived advantage in so doing.

The empirical and statistical data used in these papers indicates that for many, the traditional BAPTIST distinctives have been transmuted so that churches are more generic believer- and Bible-based churches than before. What therefore entitles them to the name “Baptist”? This is where a combination of empirical and theological/spiritual methodology comes into play. As in the case of Holmes, we are wanting to identify the vision and spirit that has created and sustained the movement – the one that “has proved [to be] repeatedly generative and dynamic” (page 161) – the “Baptist vision” that we feel is “sufficiently and profoundly right” (page 162).

Once we have described the movement accurately and then identified the dynamic, we need to work out how this vision will be realised in practice which calls for hermeneutical, theological, pastoral and organisation considerations to be applied. Throughout we also need a process of “purification” (as Holmes puts it) – trying to “identify the places where we have failed to be faithful enough to the biblical call, to try to spot distortions that leave us conforming to the world, not the vision of Christ-like living.” (page 162)

In other words, if we are going to remain as Baptist, we have to have good reasons, or else we should just drop the name or merge with others. Today, more than ever before, we need to be able to articulate this Baptist vision of the Lordship of Christ as mediated in Scripture in relation to the local church and the individual in our particular social context. We need to heed our General Secretary’s call to focus more on who we are and what we should become. I hope my paper is some help in this direction.

END

**BWA Baptist Heritage and Identity Commission**  
**Proposed Questions for Baylor Survey - Version 2 David Parker 17 July 2012**  
All questions to be forced

**1. How important are the following distinctive principles for you/your church (rank 1 least to 5 highest)**

- Lordship of Christ
- Authority of Scripture
- The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing the new birth, regeneration or conversion
- The church as a gathered fellowship of committed believers
- Believer's Baptism by immersion as a necessity for Church membership
- The Priesthood of all believers
- A called and educated ministry and the appointment of deacons to lead the local church
- Observance of the Lord's Supper
- Religious Freedom
- The necessity of witness, evangelism and missionary outreach
- The governance of the local church through a regular church members' meeting
- The importance of associating with other churches and Christians for the purposes of cooperation in mission and service, and as an expression of the unity of the Body of Christ
- Affirmation of Baptist Confessions or statements of Faith such as 2nd London Confession (1689), Philadelphia Confession (1742), New Hampshire Confession, Baptist Faith and Message etc
- Affirmation of historic creeds of the Christian church such as the Apostles' Creed and/or the Nicene Creed

**2. How important are the following aspects of church life (rank 1 least to 5 highest)**

- Community care and social justice issues
- Reaching those who do not attend church
- Attending weekly worship services
- Traditional style of worship and music
- Contemporary style of worship and music
- Sharing in Communion/Lord's Supper
- Social activities within the life of the church

- Sermons and Bible study groups
- Fellowship and care groups
- Ministry to children and youth
- Ministry to women and men
- Prayer ministry for one another
- Cross-cultural missionary support and involvement
- Evangelistic activities within the local area
- Involvement of church members in making decisions about the life and activities of the church
- Global mission activities by your local church
- Other?

**3. Which of the following best describes the meaning and purpose of Baptism as understood in your church? (1 least relevant to 5 most relevant)**

- a celebration of forgiveness, cleansing from sin and new life
- personal identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- reception of the Holy Spirit into your life
- obedience to the command of Jesus Christ
- public witness to your faith/conversion
- an essential condition for becoming a member of the local church
- way to make a personal public commitment as a disciple and witness of Jesus Christ
- a confirmation of your commitment and status in Christ
- a biblically taught way for God to strengthen my faith and to give me confidence in Him
- An outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of conversion and new life in Christ
- other?

**4. Complete this sentence:**

The most important and essential aspect of being a Baptist for me and/or my church is -----