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**Baptists and other Christians in Australia:
'Missing in Action, Lost Opportunity or
Mission Accomplished?'**

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David Parker

OUTLINE

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Abstract:

Charles Stewart, Queensland's first Baptist minister, displayed a very enlightened approach to the important question of Baptist identity and relations with other churches. However, as a study of examples covering the establishment of later churches, denominational leaders and their policies indicate, his vision was not sustained.

In fact, after nearly 200 years in Australia, the original inspiration seems to have faded and the observance of historic Baptist principles is piece-meal. Key elements seem to be dropped at will, suggesting that the distinctive features are not regarded as an integrated whole, even though this is what accounts for the emergence of Baptists at the beginning as the end product of the logical progression from the Reformers through the Puritans and the Separatists to our founding fathers.

Various themes have been used as the central foundational principle of Baptist witness but there is a strong biblical and theological case for salvation understood as regeneration (or the gathered church), which is a more specific view than 'the gospel'; it also provides more content than biblical authority or Lordship of Christ on their own.

While this is a theme that is well able to energise, motivate and direct the Baptist vision, it can also be related to the wider view of the kingdom of God, consideration of which can open the way for good relations with others (as Stewart showed) even in the absence of complete agreement with their tenets.

If Baptists can regain this perspective, it will stand them in good stead as they seem to engage in a vital mission to the world and make a valuable contribution to the Christian community at a critical time in history.

I Introduction

With the Baptist origins in the line of Puritan-Separatism and the ambivalent attitude of the movement towards ecumenism over the course of its history, the present topic of relations with other Christians is obviously an important one. The question is whether after four hundred years worldwide and nearly two hundred in Australia, Baptists still have a contribution to make to the global Christian family and to the community in general?¹

The subject of Baptist identity is a minefield, and crowded with many ideas, experts and their books. In general, at the local church level, responses range from the pragmatic to the sectarian. But to make our way through this tangle, we may begin by observing that the Baptist movement (and Protestantism as a whole) can be viewed as a reform movement within the greater body of the people of God, rather than claiming to be the whole church or presenting themselves as a self-righteous sect. That is, at the beginning and at various points along the way, Baptist people believed there were aspects of contemporary Christian belief and practice which were not in line with the ideal. This meant that they felt they were justified in maintaining their separate existence. Paul Beasley-Murray expresses the view for a modern audience when he says, 'These distinctives together make Baptists Baptist. They are distinctives without which the wider church of God would be much the poorer, and to which Baptists still need to bear witness.'²

Hence we have the lists of distinctives that are standard topics of books and study courses on Baptist principles. Some were important in the founding years, such as the nature of the church, believers' baptism and religious freedom, while others became important at various points along the way, including missions, evangelism and the nature of biblical authority and interpretation.

Assuming there was justification for the emergence and continuance of the movement, we could expect a time when the task would be done, and Baptists would happily go out of existence as a separate movement.

II The Australian Story

From this perspective, it is appropriate to consider the foundation of Baptist work in various parts of Australia. We recall that it was a quite shaky in many places, and, with all the mainline churches already established, Baptists were comparatively late on the scene. So we can ask what the first Baptists thought they

¹ For a sample of this type of questioning at the denominational level, see Robert A. Beeston, 'The role of Baptists in the world today' *The Queensland Baptist* (QB), June 15, 1965, 8-10; for an individual approach, see <http://neobaptist.com/about/>: (accessed 16 June 2009)

² Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers: The Baptist way of being the church* (np: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1992), 7; for a more colourful example that circulated in Queensland, see QB, Dec 1913, 182.

were doing in setting up yet another new Christian denomination in this country.³ The same question applies to outreach in later periods to new suburban, regional and rural centres across the country as Baptists tried to catch up with the other churches. The answers may range from the most noble all the way through to theologically unprincipled, opportunistic or clear-cut sectarian motives.⁴

The earliest expression of Baptist life in Queensland was one of the most visionary, and could have set the pattern for the future, but it was thwarted soon after it got under way. Rev. Charles Stewart,⁵ the first Baptist minister in Queensland, who arrived in 1849 as the chaplain on Dr John Dunmore Lang's initial immigrant ship, became minister of the United Evangelical Church (UEC) which was formed by Baptists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists travelling on the same vessel and by others already in the colony. Being a Scot, coming from a Presbyterian family (a brother was a Presbyterian minister), and sponsored by Lang, it was supposed that Stewart was Presbyterian, especially by adherents of that tradition in Brisbane who had been promised one of their own ministers by Lang. However Stewart was a convinced Baptist, even though bitter experiences of 'ultra-democracy'⁶ at one of his previous Birmingham pastorates made him aware of some of the deficiencies of the system and some of the attractions of Presbyterianism. But he was totally committed to the concept of a 'holy' rather than a 'large church', the authority of Scripture, freedom of conscience, the separation of church and state, the Lordship of Christ and other key Baptist principles.⁷

However, when it came to setting up the UEC, he used the 1846 Evangelical Alliance statement of faith as a basis for a comprehensive church (he had been in Birmingham when this statement was being developed), allowing for either believers' or infant baptism 'as the Saviour's institutions are conscientiously interpreted', and for open communion.⁸

Stewart's sponsor, Lang, advocated a united church, advising Stewart and his fellow-pioneers before their departure from England against the understandable tendency to commence their own denominations; he said it was impractical in the new colony to have separate 'sentry-boxes of chapels' for each of the participating

³ Much more work is needed to provide reliable empirical data and reflection on many aspects of Australian Baptist life, so the examples which follow are drawn from resources readily available to me and concentrate on the theological and biblical principles which seemed to drive those involved.

⁴ For example, questions were often asked about the crusades mounted by the leadership to establish a Baptist church in every town above a certain population, irrespective of the existing Christian presence in those places.

⁵ David Parker, *'Strange Bedfellows': Rev. Charles Stewart, Brisbane's First Baptist Ministers and the United Evangelical Church* (Brisbane: Baptist Historical Society, 1998).

⁶ Parker, *Strange Bedfellows*, 8.

⁷ Parker, *Strange Bedfellows*, 14. Stewart said, 'It is just possible that some may regard my fidelity [to the principle of a church composed of active believers] as an insult; but I must leave the consequences in the hand of the Master, and be more anxious to secure a holy than a large church. (Stewart to Ham 29 Oct 1849)

⁸ Parker, *Strange Bedfellows*, 14-16, quoting letter, C Stewart to J Ham, 2 June 1849; the same EA statement was probably behind the statement which became the pattern for most state Australian Baptist Union statements of faith

denominations.⁹ Although a staunch Presbyterian, Lang did not hesitate to work with others for the sake of extending the God's kingdom (and sometimes his own!) but Stewart had more profound theological foundations for his vision of a united evangelical church than his mentor.

However, his vision was cut short by his own mortality after only six years, and it wilted under the pressure of others. They included both local Presbyterians who insisted on forming their own church and by others, including Baptists, who came into the colony later from Sydney and UK and did not therefore have the same perspective as the earlier pioneers. So as soon as Stewart, plagued by ill health, left Brisbane in early 1885, the Baptists formed their own church (August 1855), followed in due course by Congregationalists and the remaining Presbyterians. Inside a year, the Baptist work floundered and Rev. James Voller, an 'denominational expansionist'¹⁰ who was pastor of Sydney's Bathurst Street church, came to advise them about a course of action that would put them onto a firm footing for the future.

But even so, the first Baptist church, Wharf Street, like some others in the country in similar circumstances, did show a modicum of openness by allowing for non-Baptist membership at the start, at least for charitable and pragmatic purposes if not on the basis of Stewart's theological vision. However this was short-lived for it became Baptist only within two years of its founding.¹¹ This narrowing process went even further soon enough with the creation of the breakaway Jireh Particular Baptist Church on doctrinal grounds in 1861.¹² Not long after, there was considerable unease expressed by some members on account of lax discipline and the 'easy-believism' approach of pastor, Irish evangelist, B. G. Wilson. Edward Street church and its successors was the result.¹³ Another division occurred in 1868 with the departure of a German group who did not agree with the open communion of Wharf St Church.¹⁴

These developments, partially of course because of numerical and organizational growth, did not spell total alienation and there was plenty of genuine fellowship amongst the churches which appeared in the first decade or two of Baptist life in Queensland; eventually it issued in the formation of the Baptist Association

⁹ Parker, *Strange Bedfellows*, 21 quoting Lang in *The Banner* 28 June 1848.

¹⁰ Ken R. Manley, *In the Heart of Sydney: Central Baptist Church, 1836-1986* (Sydney: Central Baptist Church, 1987), 37; David Parker (editor), *Pressing on with the Gospel: the story of Baptists in Queensland 1855-2005* (Brisbane: Baptist Historical Society of Queensland, 2005), 3; Parker, *Strange Bedfellows*, 29)

¹¹ This was in 20 April 1855 as an open communion church, although a few months later a more open direction appeared when the clause requiring members to hold Calvinistic doctrines was deleted (Parker, *Strange Bedfellows*, 34).

¹² David Parker, 'Jireh Particular Baptist Church, Brisbane: Calvinism in an Australia Context' (*Baptist Quarterly*, 31:4 (October 1985), 159-178; there was evident tension over this move because Wharf Street pastor, B G Wilson, refused to attend the stone laying on the grounds that he would be condoning the split (*Moreton Bay Courier* (MBC) 21 August 1862, 2).

¹³ David Parker (editor), *'Fruit from the Tree of Experience: The Joshua Jenyns History of the Baptist Church in Brisbane* (Brisbane: Baptist Historical Society of Queensland, 1996), 5-7 and *passim*; Stan W. Nickerson, *Rev. B.G. Wilson: Queensland Baptist Founding Father* (Brisbane: Baptist Historical Society of Queensland, 1998), 49-55.

¹⁴ J. E. White, *A Fellowship of Service: A history of the Baptist Union of Queensland 1877-1977* (Brisbane: Baptist Union of Queensland, 1977), 54, 38f.

of Queensland in 1877 which had a creditable enough history of cooperation and united effort despite a few incidents along the way. One further minor example of this narrowing of denominational interests was seen in a short dispute over the open membership stance of the Taringa Baptist Church; it was soon resolved with a compromise at the denominational level, but not without a reaction from the stricter convictions of the German Baptists at Kalbar who withdrew from the Union for a period of time.¹⁵ Decades later, in the 1960s, another small group of Baptists with strict views, the independent Baptists from USA who saw Australia as a needy mission field, refused any advances from the Baptist Union for fellowship; instead they were determined to maintain their stance, neatly summed up in the banner of the newspaper that circulated among them: 'Evangelistic, Fundamental, Premillennial, Baptist; Opposes Modernism, Worldliness and Formalism.'¹⁶

After the initial establishment of Baptist work in Queensland, as for most other parts of the country, further development occurred mainly by the formation of churches in previously untouched areas to service the needs of Baptists who were living in those places. Accordingly, when a Baptist cause was established, it was not unknown for specifically denominational distinctives rather than broad Christian ones to figure strongly in the speeches delivered to justify the addition of another new creed in the district. Often believers' baptism was at the centre of these presentations; sometimes the debate became quite public through lectures and the press.¹⁷ This stout defence of Baptist principles in the public arena was followed through at a more refined and controlled level in some of the addresses given by Presidents of the Baptist Association/Union.¹⁸

More serious differences occurred when the Churches of Christ entered Queensland by taking over a Baptist church during an evangelistic mission¹⁹ which their evangelist was invited to conduct; however, instead of the usual gospel presentation, the message was 'the old Jerusalem doctrine' focusing on the essential place of baptism in the plan of salvation. This kind of tension was repeated in other places and was the pattern for relations between the two denominations. However, over one hundred years later when the Baptists and Churches of Christ in the north Queensland town of Charters Towers merged, no doctrinal issues were considered, although a decade on, reports indicated that they had finally surfaced and had begun to cause

¹⁵ Parker, *Pressing On*, 20.

¹⁶ *The Biblical Fundamentalist* formerly published by Evangelistic Literature Enterprise Ltd, now *The Biblical Builder* published by Lighthouse Baptist Church, Rockhampton, Queensland.
http://www.lighthousebaptist.com.au/home/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=59&Itemid=102
 accessed 23 June 2009

¹⁷ *The Queensland Freeman*, Jan 1883, 10; QB, Sept 1906, 142; MBC 5 Feb 1859, 2; MBC 9 Feb 1859, 2; some correspondence was published by the Baptist church in 'To the Christians of Brisbane' (Brisbane: J.P. Pugh, Printer, 1859);

¹⁸ David Parker, 'Baptist principles: rediscovering an identity', *Tempo* (Baptist Theological College of Queensland Student Association), September 1995 Vol 2 No. 5, 1-3,8.

¹⁹ David Parker, 'Baptist relations with Churches of Christ', *Queensland Baptist Forum* (Baptist Historical Society of Queensland), No 63 August 2006, 3-8.

difficulties.²⁰ Anecdotal reports of a period of cooperation between a Baptist church and a Uniting Church at Hackham, South Australia also indicate that practical rather than doctrinal considerations were paramount, although at West Croydon, the situation was more advanced.²¹ There were stronger tensions between Baptists and Pentecostal churches and individuals.²²

Baptist attitudes to relations with Catholic and Anglican church were frequently lukewarm or hostile, thus contributing in earlier days especially to Australia's record of sectarianism.²³ However, generally speaking, relationships with Protestant churches were good enough for cooperation on matters of common concern such as evangelism, social responsibility, and representation to government, the media and the community. These relationships were typically formalised by councils of churches (or their predecessors)²⁴ and locally by ministers' fraternals. In more recent times, ad hoc networks or relationship involving pastors and local churches have been more common.

There was basic respect for each others' positions, with allowance for the occasional swapping over as a person became a Baptist, or vice versa, on the grounds of personal conviction (or perhaps only convenience).²⁵ This mutual recognition has sometime been pushed to the limits, however, when

²⁰ Seminars were presented in 2004 at a combined convention of the Baptist Union of Queensland and the Churches of Christ in Queensland (Seminars recorded by Baptist Union of Queensland).

²¹ Rev. Dr John Lewis, email correspondence with author, 7 May, 2009.

²² Baptist pastor, W. K. Holmans said that when evangelist Hyman Appelman visited Brisbane in 1926, he was asked to 'bring messages to meet the problem' of Pentecostalism and 'so eloquent and so precise was each message, that Pentecostalism was hit a hammer blow.' (J H Gibbins, *W K Holmans – the life and ministry of a dedicated pastor* (Brisbane: Baptist Theological College, Thesis, 1986); Australian Baptist Evangelist John Ridley also became involved in controversy over his contacts with Pentecostalism (M. Hutchinson, 'Ridley, John Gotch' in T. Larsen (editor), *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2003), 548); copy of his 1953 apology in Baptist Church Archives, Queensland; David Parker, 'Baptists in Queensland and the Pentecostal Movement', *Queensland Baptist Forum*, No 59, Dec 2004, 7-8 and subsequent issues; <http://home.pacific.net.au/~dparker/BapChar.htm>; Parker, *Pressing on*, 109f, 114f, 142) Parker, *Pressing on*, 109f; In the Baptist Union of Queensland Executive Minutes 15 Dec 1943 it was said that his 'associations with the Pentecostalist movement presented a menace to our work;' see also Minutes for 20 April 1944, 22 Nov 1945.

²³ Hans Mol, *Religion in Australia: a sociological investigation* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1971), chapter 21, 'Sectarian Squabbles in Australian History', 141-149, chapter 22, 'Anti-Catholicism', 151-153.

²⁴ The main reference here is to the late 19th century and earlier 20th century bodies, typically represented by the Queensland Council of Churches formed in 1926 on the basis of earlier metropolitan ministers' associations and church councils which were intended to provide 'an opportunity for consultation and co-operation on matters affecting the religious, moral and social interests of the community' (4th Annual report, Queensland Council of Churches, copy held in Baptist Church Archives, Queensland; see also <http://www.nswchurches.com/content/aboutusHistory.aspx> accessed 28 June 2009); this contrasted strongly with the post-1948 ecumenically-oriented bodies which were intended 'to establish and maintain closed relations with the World Council of Churches' and 'to assist the growth of ecumenical consciousness . . . and generally to promote Christian unity' (Constitution, Australian Council of Churches, 1976; Ronald Lawson, *Brisbane in the 1890s: a study of an Australian Urban Society* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1973), 249 and ff.

²⁵ Michael Petras, 'The Second Exodus: Australian Baptist Ministers who joined the Presbyterian Church 1885-1970' (*The Recorder* (Baptist Historical Society of NSW), No 90 February 2005, 3-29.

developments such as an apparent liberalisation of another church has become a high profile issue.²⁶ Baptists became even more nervous when this kind of liberalism appeared to be entering their own ranks.²⁷

However, in recent times, trends such as the charismatic movement, contemporary worship, the rise of the mega-church model, corporatization, and the extending of ministerial training beyond in-house denominational programmes has meant that denominational differences have become much less important for attendees as well as for pastors. Baptism is often not made a pre-requisite for church membership, membership itself is de-emphasised, and congregational government has been significantly modified. These changes have been accompanied by considerable interchange between denominations.²⁸

Australian Baptists have also been highly prominent in interdenominational Christian work.²⁹ This represents another form of relationship with Christians of other denominations based on common evangelical principles and the doctrine of spiritual unity through the invisible church, well expressed by the often used slogan, 'All one in Christ' (Gal. 3:28). This involvement is therefore on an individual, rather than a local church (much less a denominational basis); some Baptist ministers and full-time workers have exercised a prominent and fruitful ministry, sometimes for an extended periods, in these kinds of para-church activities. On a deeper level, denominational and interdenominational work may be seen in a positive light as two inter-related aspects of the wider Kingdom of God, often expressed as 'modality' and 'sodality.' However, there is also the possibility for this relationship to be misunderstood as rivalry and disloyalty, leading to harmful friction.

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Overall, Baptist involvement in the conciliar ecumenical movement in Australia has been minimal and controversial.³¹ Although Baptists showed some interest in late 19th-early 20th century developments towards Protestant church union,³² a different attitude has existed in regard to the mid-20th century developments, apart from an idealistic and somewhat naive view at the beginning of this period. The range of views was reflected in reported comments in 1997 when the Baptist Union of Australia (BUA) decided on observer

²⁶ David Parker, *Fundamentalism and Conservative Protestantism in Australia 1920-1980* (PhD, University of Queensland, 1982), 255-287.

²⁷ Parker, *Fundamentalism*, 324-339. Ken R. Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to 'Eternity' A History of Australian Baptists* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 570-574; 752-757; E. Roberts-Thomson, *With Hands Outstretched: Baptists and the Ecumenical Movement* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1962); J.O. Hogg, 'Triumph or Tragedy' (Stanmore Baptist Church, 1985).

²⁸ The Baptist Union of Queensland report the reception of credentials of 12 ministers from other denominations in the period 2003 to 2008 inclusive, out of a total of 121 received; this does not include pastors who did not seek official accreditation.

²⁹ For an examination of this area of Christian witness with the wider ecumenical international and historical framework, see Rosemary Dowsett, 'Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity: An Evangelical Perspective', in David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross (editors), *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now* (Carlisle/Oxford: Paternoster/Regnum, 2009) 250-262.

³⁰ *The Australian Baptist*, 24 June 1964, 1; for a local example, see 'The Anatomy of a Challenge,' *Anvil: A Baptist Quarterly*, June 1969, 4

³¹ Manley, *Woolloomooloo*, 579-588; 701-703.

³² Ian Breward, *A History of the Australian Churches* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 99-101.

status at the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA).³³ The former BUA President, Rev. G. Billing, thought that 'co-operative mission had more credibility in the community' so 'Baptists should be proactive ... in making their distinctive contribution within the framework of the wider church.' But Dr S. W. Solomon, General Superintendent of the Baptist Union of Queensland, reflecting the long-standing views of his state,³⁴ said, 'If we think "our point of view" will significantly affect the juggernauts of the large denominations, we are kidding ourselves.' The reasons he advanced were a litany of the doctrinal and practical arguments that had frequently been made in the past by opponents of the ecumenical movement, including especially liberal doctrine and morality, and the fear of a super-church.³⁵ Others might also have referred to the dangers of a world-wide super church, perhaps under Roman Catholic domination, with dark eschatological overtones, and of the past days of horrific repression of minority religious views when religious liberty was denied and the reading of the Bible suppressed.³⁶

So Baptists generally are not averse to working with those of like mind, especially in practical matters, but, apart from some notable exceptions³⁷ they are not particularly interested in the ecumenical vision. Moreover, they are not under much pressure to re-evaluate their views at the present time with ecumenical movement in the doldrums. Even the new incarnation of the ecumenical movement in the form of the Global Christian Forum, which is potentially much more appealing to Baptists, has made minimal impact in Australia.³⁸ Any cooperation that occurs is most likely to take place pragmatically at the local level. Furthermore, there is little interest in organised cooperation at the denominational level through bodies such as councils of churches.³⁹ Aside from structured programs, however, there has been in more recent times considerable fellowship between Baptists and others with charismatic and social justice interests and also at the practical

³³ *The National Baptist* (Baptist Union of Australia), Dec 1997, 10. The NCCA was established in 1994 as the successor to the Australian Council of Churches, established 1946.
(http://www.ncca.org.au/about_us/ncca_story, accessed 29 June 2009)

³⁴ The Baptist Union of Queensland had decided in 1964 that none of its agencies or departments would 'continue to join in membership or affiliate with . . . a body which is a part or division of or affiliated with' the Australian ecumenical movement, although ad hoc participation was permitted 'on specific matters making for the extension of Christ's Kingdom' (*Baptist Union of Queensland Year Book*, 164f).

³⁵ For example, Australian Baptists voted against affiliation with the Australian Council of Churches in 1950 and in 1961-62; in Queensland the proposal was defeated 149 to 30 and 210 to 77; *The National Baptist*, Dec 1997, 10; see also 'Australian Baptists and the World Council of Churches: Statement for and against affiliation for the guidance of State Baptist Unions in their reconsideration of the question.' Issued with the authority of The Executive Committee of the Baptist Union of Australia, January, 1961.

³⁶ Perhaps these anti-ecumenical attitudes are reflected in the view that ordination of pastors is not appropriate for Baptists on the grounds that it is a carry-over from Catholicism; see, Brian Winslade, 'Ordination: Does it fit? A discussion Paper prepared for the 2008 meetings of the BWA Church Leadership Commission, Prague, Czech Republic.'

³⁷ A Baptist Ecumenical Fellowship of Australia did exist for a time until it was found that it was making no impact on the denomination, Manley, *Woolloomooloo*, 703).

³⁸ World Christian leaders meet in Kenya <http://www.bwanet.org/default.aspx?pid=717>; Neville Callam's Comments on the Global Christian Forum <http://www.bwanet.org/default.aspx?pid=718> Accessed 3 July 2009

³⁹ There is some cooperation in theological education but this can also be problematic (Manley, *Woolloomooloo*, 703); other examples include sporting clubs; Baptist leaders participate in 'Heads of churches' meetings but this does not generally involve the denomination in formal ecumenical relationships). The QCC ceased in 1994; other states became affiliated with ACC as an ecumenical body; the NSW Council of Churches still continues.
<http://www.nswchurches.com/content/aboutusHistory.aspx> accessed 28 June 2009

level in the arena of new church developments such as church growth, and movements such as the Bill Hybels and Rick Warren models of church life.

III The Baptist Vision

For the most part, Baptists have focused on developing their own work at local and denominational levels according to their own vision. What that vision consists of no doubt varies considerably. Some indications of it can be seen in the slogans that have been used by Baptists, such as ‘The Bible says’; ‘Evangelism – the heart of all we do’; ‘Evangelize or Fossilize’; ‘Every Baptist a missionary’; ‘A Free church in a free state’; ‘Queensland for Christ’; ‘Our goal – a Christian homeland’.

In earlier days, the concept of a strict separation of church and state was an important principle for which Baptists stood, sometimes quite sacrificially in terms of property and financial support of ministers. However, in later times, this principle has been interpreted in such a way as not to prevent the benefits of a welfare state being accepted for social welfare work and theological education.⁴⁰

These indications reflect the traditional Baptist distinctives which appear in denominational reviews⁴¹ and official documents (such as Constitutions and By-Laws), and are well rehearsed in scholarly writings⁴² and in material for church member orientation.⁴³ However, there is no doubt that they are under some pressure in recent times with controversies arising on particular interpretations of existing distinctives (e.g. biblical authority) and whether or not there should further distinctions added (e.g., on topics such as charismatic gifts, and the ministry of women). In earlier times issues such as eschatology, the scope of salvation or social mores might have been under discussion. These traditional Baptist principles have also become problematic in other contexts, including the efficiency of church government, the role of the denomination and access to government funding for theological education and welfare work. Hence to accommodate these pressures, there have been wholesale changes to the structure and governance of local churches and the denomination⁴⁴,

⁴⁰ White, *A Fellowship of Service*, 162-f; Ken Manley’s paper, ‘From Amsterdam to Adelaide: Baptists after 400 Years’, presented in Adelaide, SA on 1 May, 2009 highlights the importance of Baptist views on church-state relations in the formation of South Australia by focusing on the life of George Fife Angas (1789-1879).

⁴¹ A recent example is the Baptist Union of Queensland Triennial Review of 2001 which adopted a statement of 11 ‘Core Values’ including the Lordship of Christ, the authority of Scripture, regenerate church membership, believer’s baptism by immersion, congregational church government and liberty of conscience.

⁴² See Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers*; Henry Cook, *What Baptists Stand For* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1961).

⁴³ The Clifford Press series of booklets published by the Australian Baptist Board of Christian Education regularly included such material.

⁴⁴ Les Ball, ‘The De-democratisation of Queensland Baptists 1990-2004’, in Graeme Chatfield (editor), *Leadership and Baptist Church Governance* (Eastwood: Morling Press, 2005), 102-116.

coupled with the introduction of elders, new approaches to the role of the pastor, a considerable growth of interest in open membership, and new attitudes to the state aid.⁴⁵

So there is a natural tendency to reconsider the nature and importance of these principles for the present age. Theological and historical reflection and ecumenical dialogue have not been as prominent in Australia as elsewhere as ways of dealing with pressures for change. Far more usual is grassroots praxis, where changes in practice are made to suit local and contemporary needs with some kind of rationalisation being offered thereafter.

These developments give the impression that any one or more of these traditional Baptist principles can be modified, de-emphasised or even eliminated by themselves, according to circumstances, without affecting the overall Baptist position. This raises the question of whether the traditional principles are a purely an ad hoc collection, rather than being individually necessary or a group that is tied together.

Changes in the status of Baptist distinctives is also sometimes made on the grounds that none of these principles is unique to Baptists, thereby seeming to diminish the importance of them individually and making them individually dispensable. As Paul Beasley-Murray puts it, 'There is no one distinctive Baptist belief. . . . It is the combination of these various beliefs which makes Baptists distinctive.'⁴⁶

If the traditional Baptist distinctives are not regarded as either unique in themselves or of forming anything more than a miscellaneous group of distinguishing principles (even if with historical significance), it is not surprising then that there is a strong tendency in the appropriate circumstances to minimise their importance and practice. A current example of this is when the link between baptism and church membership (and even church membership itself) is regarded a merely a human custom and therefore in the same category as the legalism of the Pharisees so strongly condemned in the Gospels.⁴⁷ Similarly, communion or the Lord's Supper has not been seen as one of the Baptist distinctives, but regarding it as simply a memorial of the crucifixion, which is typical of Australian Baptists, can hardly do anything to elevate its importance. No doubt one of the reasons for the lack of emphasis on the link between baptism and church membership is due to the similar interpretation baptism receives as simply an act of obedience and witness which in practice becomes an option alongside other equally commendable and perhaps more attractive expressions of discipleship.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ White, *A Fellowship of Service*, 162; another example is the extension of Australian government financial assistance for theological education in 2005.

⁴⁶ Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers*, 6, gives believers' baptism and congregational government as examples. See also the following: 'No one doctrine is exclusive to Baptists, but no other group has maintained emphases on all these points in this particular way' (*We Baptists*, 22).

⁴⁷ <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/9660.htm>.

⁴⁸ G.R. Beasley-Murray, 'The Paradox of Baptism among the Baptists', *The Australian Baptist*, July 20, 1966, 9.

But it is difficult to credit this kind of loose aggregation of features with the power needed to bring a movement such as the Baptists into existence and to sustain it over four hundred years, sometimes in very difficult conditions. A movement like this needs 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'.⁴⁹ The existence of a strong integrating factor also lies behind statements such as Henry Cook's that the Baptist conception of the Christian faith is the 'most logical and consistent of all Protestant Christians'.⁵⁰ It is supported by the view of Baptist origins that Baptists represent 'the last stage in the evolution of English Separatism as it moved forward to its logical outcome in believers' baptism'⁵¹ rather than being the result of Anabaptist influence.⁵² Therefore, as S. Mark Heim states, '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.'⁵³

This concept of an integrated system is not always presented clearly, even by the standard books that have influenced Baptists so strongly.⁵⁴ It is evidently not understood well by some contemporary Baptists, who seem to focus on minor points such as biblical inerrancy, creationism, the ministry of women or social norms and elevate them to major issues, or in other cases, hold on to the traditional points but without much understanding of their meaning and background. In each case a kind of fundamentalism is the result. On the other hand, the lack of systematic theological integration has no doubt resulted in some of the anomalies that are evident today when there are claims of Baptist identity but, at the same time, the loss of key elements of Baptist understanding.

⁴⁹ Wheeler Robinson, *Life and Faith*, 18.

⁵⁰ H. Cook, *The Why of our Faith* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1947), 92; cf also page 94: 'It ought to be clear by this time that the Baptist faith is thoroughly self-consistent.' Idem, 95: 'Baptists simply carry the Protestant principle to its logical issue.' Wheeler Robinson, *Life and Faith*, 12, referring to J. H. Rushbrooke, stated, 'In history, as well as in idea, the Baptists carry forward the idea of the Reformation to its furthest issue, and have not unfairly been described as 'Protestant of the Protestants.'

⁵¹ A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1970), 56. Also, Wheeler Robinson, *Life and Faith*, 14; William Poole in *The Queensland Freeman*, Jan 1882, 4.

⁵² H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: four centuries of Baptist witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 49-60.

⁵³ 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; Wheeler Robinson, *Life and Faith*, 16

⁵⁴ James Leo Garrett has recently pointed out that 'between 1850 and the early 1950s, Baptists published reams of literature dealing with 'Baptist distinctive.' He also asked 'whether the demise of this literature during the last 60 years has been a major factor in the failure of Baptist churches in the United States to teach their members about the Baptist heritage.' (Quoted in Ken Camp, 'At 400 years, theological distinctions define, divide Baptists', Associated Baptist Press, June 15, 2009; http://www.abpnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4156&Itemid=53 accessed 3 July 2009)

We can now turn to this vision of the Christian life underlying the historic Baptist vision. If understood properly, it has the ability to provide a basis for positive relationship with other Christians and help us achieve our goal of contributing to the Kingdom of God.

IV Regeneration - the Integrating Factor

For Rev. Robert Beeston, loyalty to the New Testament principle was the central issue,⁵⁵ while for others it is the Lordship of Christ.⁵⁶ Both of these are of the utmost importance and figure prominently in the traditional lists of Baptist principles. However, this is a focus on the *formal* principle of authority which can, without care, easily lead to legalism, cultish sectarianism, or biblicism. To avoid this problem, the Lordship of Christ and biblical authority need to be brought together dynamically along the lines reflected by Henry Cook, ‘Baptists are committed by their fundamental principle to an acceptance of the mind of Christ for the church as it is revealed in the Scripture.’⁵⁷ They also need to be set within a robust theological framework and be supported by consistent hermeneutics and a deep spirituality.

This process can be facilitated by considering the *material* principle, which T. J. Malyon mentioned in his retiring presidential address to the 1911 Queensland Assembly when he spoke of ‘a distinguishing principle which inevitably leads out in various directions.’⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ That is, the list of traditional Baptist principles logically cohere and are represented in believers’ baptism which, as Malyon stated, is its symbol.⁶⁰

Because of this integrated system in which believers’ baptism holds such a key position, Heim is correct to point out that in dialogue with other expressions of the faith, Baptists ‘object more strongly to an ecclesiology based on infant baptism than they do to infant baptism.’⁶¹ T. Lorenzen also saw the problem, 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

⁵⁵ Beeston, ‘The role of Baptists in the world today’, *The Queensland Baptist*, June 15, 1965, 9.

⁵⁶ Ken Manley describes H. Wheeler Robinson’s five-pointed star centring on the Lord Jesus which ‘suggests that the central faith of Baptists is the Lordship of Christ.’ (Ken R. Manley, *Baptists: their heritage and faith* (Brisbane: Smith and Patterson, 1974), 61-62. The Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture are brought together (after the Kingdom of God) in Garrett, *We Baptists*, 22.

⁵⁷ Cook, *What Baptists Stand For*, 212.

⁵⁸ T.J. Malyon ‘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 (Note that a similar address titled ‘The Principles of the Baptist Church’ was delivered at the Baptist Union of NSW Assembly, reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 Sept 1886 and reported in the *Brisbane Courier*, Wednesday 22 September 1886, 7.

⁵⁹ Malyon ‘Our Principles and Our Mission’, 44.

⁶⁰ Malyon ‘Our Principles and Our Mission’, 47; For similar expressions, see Wheeler Robinson, *Life and Faith*, 16; Garrett, *We Baptists*, 22.

⁶¹ S. Mark Heim, ‘Baptismal recognition and the Baptist Churches’, 154.

baptism. *Any theological challenge to the doctrine of infant baptism is immediately seen as questioning the sacramental integrity of the paedo-baptist churches.*⁶²

The symbolical nature of believers' baptism also explains why the basis of the church is 'not an arbitrary covenant' as had been the case for the Separatists, but 'the ordinance of baptism administered to believers only.'⁶³ Accordingly, contemporary attempts to use a covenant as the basis for a church⁶⁴ are destroyed. Even more importantly, the de-emphasising of baptism and church membership also becomes an extremely critical issue for the spiritual and theological foundation of Baptist churches; this accounts for the way key Baptist concepts of church life and ministry have been converted so easily into generic forms in the modern period.

There is some justification for making the nature of the church⁶⁵ or more generally, the gospel,⁶⁶ the integrating factor for Baptists. However, there is also good biblical and theological support and practical benefits for expressing it in terms of regeneration, or ecclesiologically, the gathered or believers' church.

We call to mind that the important passage, Romans 6:1-11, refers to the outcome of baptism (symbolising and appropriating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ), as walking in 'newness of life.' Then there are the familiar passages of John 3:3-8 and 1 Peter 1:3 with their focus on being 'born again' by the Spirit of God; we can note also the Johannine references to the indwelling vine and abiding in Christ (John 15), and the pervasive Pauline notion of being 'in Christ,' all of which are so strongly supported by concepts of transformation (Rom 12) and the new life in Christ (Colossians 3:1-12). The parables also give ample evidence of the dynamic power of the Kingdom in metaphors such as a seed that grows and bears its fruit, or yeast which energetically permeates the whole loaf. There are also powerful Old Testament passages which provide firm background for this approach (Ezek 37: Jer. 31:31-34; Psalm 51:10).

We can also call on a fully Trinitarian theological framework for this approach—humanity created by God in the divine image (Gen. 1:26-27); redeemed by Christ who recapitulates human experience (Eph. 1:10), the one who comes to us in the image of God (Col 1:15; Phil: 2:6) and restores humanity so that we may be conformed once again to the image of God's Son (Rom. 8:29; Col 3:10; Eph 4:13); the renewal and empowerment of the indwelling Spirit (Rom 6:11; 8:9-17; Eph 1:13-23; 1 Peter 1:2).

⁶² 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)

⁶³ Wheeler Robinson, *Life and Faith*, 13; for another view, see Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1966), 55.

⁶⁴ For example, The 'Covenant of Belonging' used by Mission to Queensland for its church plants.

⁶⁵ Cook, *What Baptists Stand For*, 32, referring to the W.T. Whitley's famous remark, 'the distinctive feature about Baptists is their doctrine of the Church.'

⁶⁶ Manley, *Baptists: their heritage and faith*, 36 (citing the 1948 British document, 'The Baptist Doctrine of the Church'); also Manley, *The Baptist World Alliance and Inter-Church Relationship*, 25, citing Daniel Day Williams who describes Baptists as 'a form of Christian community which rest upon an experience of the Gospel.'

This strong biblical and theological foundation gives regeneration a comprehensive quality capable of guiding and empowering us in effective ministry. This grounding should also prevent it from becoming individualistic and focusing on the self-interest of personal salvation, as in some distorted forms of revivalism.

V A Distinctive Conception of Christianity

Whichever way we express it, we are dealing here with a certain distinctive conception of the nature of Christianity, which as Malyon stated bluntly, ‘forced our fathers out from Rome and from Episcopacy.’⁶⁷ Of course, it not only contrasts with the sacramental and state systems, but also with liberal Christianity and Pentecostalism, whose essences are distinctly different.⁶⁸

From one point of view, it is necessary to maintain this separation, as Malyon went on to explain:

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 (4) one of courteous but unflinching testimony.⁶⁹

But we can approach the subject more comprehensively; as Lorenzen noted,

we cannot overlook the fact that *believers’* baptism is becoming universally recognised as the baptism that was practiced by the first Christians, and many voices, including theological voices from paedobaptist churches, suggest that it may be the Baptist responsibility within the wider church to uphold the theology and practice of *believers’* baptism.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Malyon, ‘Our Principles and Our Mission’, 47. See also his remark: ‘So long as we have a firm conviction that we are divinely charged with a special work, however much we may regret it, we are forced into a separation from those holding and advocating views which we conscientiously think are most injuriously opposed to God’s word (page 45).

⁶⁸ David Parker, ‘Evangelical Worship - Sacramental, Charismatic or Biblical?’ *Colloquium*, 19:2 (May 1987), 57-64

⁶⁹ Malyon, ‘Our Principles and Our Mission’, 47.

⁷⁰ Lorenzen, ‘Baptism and Church Membership’ (emphasis original).

One way of understanding this is to put it within the wider framework of the Kingdom of God. Because we ‘share gladly in the joyful recognition of the sovereignty of the living God who has come to us in Jesus,’⁷¹ we are able to join with others who are part of that Kingdom, and participate in God’s purposes for all people and creation itself. It is our conviction (and particular contribution) that it is through regeneration and renewal (understood biblically and theologically as mentioned above) that God works to achieve his purposes in restoring fellowship with his people and bringing them to maturity in Christ.⁷² But we also know that as we grow in our understanding we may well learn that God also achieves that purpose of restoration, fellowship and fulfilment in other ways that we do not yet perceive, including perhaps the sacramental or the charismatic.

The Kingdom of God, as presented to us in Scripture, is something which by grace is certainly within the grasp of our faith and action, but it remains transcendent and its totality is only within the mind of God himself. So bearing this in mind, we are able, humbly, see God at work in others and yet retain our distinctive perspective and testimony. The way is opened to the possibility of better relations with other Christians who also acknowledge the Lordship of Christ and desire the glory of God, even if they have a different understanding at some points.

Theologically speaking, the idea of the Kingdom can bring the *formal* and the *material* principles together. Thus, we are able to follow the example of Charles Stewart, and fully respect the views of others who evidently confess the Lordship of Christ—even if we do not fully understand them, or accept their position for our regular practice.⁷³

VI Positive Contribution

In support of the idea of making a positive contribution to the wider witness of the church, we can argue that the concept of Christianity as a gathered church, composed of people regenerated by the power of God and owning the Lordship of Christ as their defining mark is one that is particularly relevant for today’s world. The need for a message of radical human transformation and of liberty under the sovereignty of God to fulfil the potentiality of the *imago Dei* is obvious. Furthermore the Baptist concept of the church focusing on spiritual values and working within the fellowship of enriching Spirit-led local and wider networks is one

⁷¹ The Kingdom of God comes first in the list of distinctives in Garrett, *We Baptists*, 22.

⁷² ‘Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.’ (Eph 4:13 RSV)

⁷³ Parker, *Strange Bedfellows*, 12; Writing to John Ham in Sydney, his nearest Baptist pastor, Stewart thought that people ‘who “most surely believe” the doctrines of that venerable, and, in the main, truthful, compendium of Christian theology [the Westminster Confession] cannot be men who would ‘speak lightly’ of the Master whom I serve, or offer violence to that still more venerable yea infallible compendium which He has put into my hands.’

that admirably suits the post-modern mood, and contrasts strongly with the aberrations forced on it in modernist period of mega-structures, hierarchical authority and rationalistic apologetics.

Malyon spoke of 'the spirituality of individual religion and of the Church, leading up to a larger unity in Christ Jesus.'⁷⁴ For Baptists, this kind of unity is already the basis of the local church where it is through confession of Christ as Lord by baptism that one is incorporated into his body and recognizes that others within the fellowship are also God's people. But James Voller, speaking as the inaugural president of the Baptist Association of Queensland (1877), saw it also as the basis of denominational life. He said, 'Unity is the essential force of our movement. Unity! not combination merely, but unity—the oneness of interflowing spiritual life. Our gatherings are to be expressions of it.' So the 'primary object' of the Association was the advancement of the spiritual life of the churches and only after that could united efforts to extend the kingdom of Christ be contemplated.⁷⁵

So it was appropriate that eventually even Queensland changed its official title from 'association' (1877) to 'Union' (1927) to come into line with the other states (although the original title had its own valuable significance). However, the idea of a genuine 'union' seems to be another casualty of recent developments where titles like 'Service Group' have taken precedence, and the role of the denominational organisation is primarily 'assisting each local Church to develop and achieve its own vision under God.'⁷⁶

Unless denominational life is considered to be 'para-church' and not 'church' at all, then the fellowship of believers and their unity in Christ which begins at the local level certainly extends to the denominational. If we take the Kingdom of God into account, there is no reason why it should not extend even further. Drawing also upon the doctrine of the invisible church, there is a 'spiritual' unity which is recognized by many in interdenominational evangelicalism, although without the will or the means to handle the inevitable theological issues that arise, there is typically little progress to observe. It is also a key element in the new direction being taken by the conciliar ecumenical movement in the Global Christian Forum which focuses strongly on the discipleship and personal testimony of each participant.⁷⁷ Yet, even within the limits of the

⁷⁴ Malyon, 'Our Principles and Our Mission', 44.

⁷⁵ David Parker, *James Voller: Pioneer Baptist Minister of Australia* (Brisbane: Baptist Historical Society of Queensland, 1997), 44; 'Our Association: its aims and responsibilities to the church and the world: an address delivered at the inaugural session 20th November 1877 by James Voller, President (copy held in Baptist Church Archives, Queensland).

⁷⁶ From Vision statement of Baptist Union of Queensland, as adopted in 1996. Even the national Baptist body has now dropped the word 'union' in its title, in favour of 'Australian Baptist Ministries' which according, to the official explanation, is one that has the virtue of 'clarifying the essential nature of our national movement.' The Press Release stated that the term 'union' had now become 'associated with the labour movement' and with 'central authority'. More seriously, the new approach has discarded the conviction behind the original term, 'our unity in Christ' which it was conceded 'appealed to many'! (BUA Press release 23 June 2009 <http://au.christiantoday.com/article/baptist-movement-to-launch-new-logo/6491.htm> accessed 11 July 2009)

⁷⁷ David Parker, 'Transforming Ecumenism? The Global Christian Forum', <http://au.christiantoday.com/article/transforming-ecumenism-the-global-christian-forum/3469.htm> (accessed

existing conciliar movement, there is scope for further progress. For example, on the vexed question of the baptismal recognition, Heim explained how infant baptism coupled with a later personal profession of faith and active Christian life could be seen by Baptists as valid in an ecumenical setting, even if it were not the norm.⁷⁸

VII Conclusion

So now we can return to our original question, and ask, Has the job been done yet? Do others accept our position or even grant that we have a point?

The basic view of regeneration and transformation is accepted by a wide range of evangelicals, although many of them (notably Reformed and Wesleyan) have not come to see the ecclesiological and sacramental implications of this position. The situation is somewhat different with independent and emerging churches, and with many churches in the Majority World which are often baptistic, although there is a strong non-baptistic hierarchialism (especially in those affected by Pentecostalism and the New Apostolic Reformation).⁷⁹ Furthermore there are still differences in ecclesiology, soteriology and spirituality with some groups who are close to Baptists on the question of baptism, such as the Brethren, Churches of Christ and Pentecostal (despite in the latter case, considerable charismatisation of Baptists); these differences occasionally cause awkward misunderstandings.

If the ideas and activities that characterise the official gatherings of the mainstream churches, their worship patterns and their publications are compared with typical Baptist examples, it is evident that there are still many differences which set Baptists apart. Despite recent scholarly opinion about the history and significance of believers' baptism,⁸⁰ there has not been much inclination for the other denominations to move officially in the Baptist direction. Charles Stewart thought that more people might have agreed with his baptistic position in Brisbane than were prepared to admit it publicly.⁸¹ However, not even all Baptists are convinced the need to pursue this vision, but seem to recoil from the prospect and speak of themselves as

30 June 2009); Richard Howell (editor), *Global Christian Forum: Transforming Ecumenism* (New Delhi: Evangelical Fellowship of India, 2007) especially chapter 10, 'The Global Christian Forum Renewing Our Global Ecumenical Method' by Sarah Rowland Jones, 140-181.

⁷⁸ Heim, 'Baptismal recognition and the Baptist Churches,' 157.

⁷⁹ Peter C Wagner, C. Peter, *Churchquake* (Ventura: Regal, 1999); Wagner, *The New Apostolic Churches* (Ventura: Regal, 1998); for a local example, see Peace Apostolic Ministries which was formed after the leader and his church left the Baptist denomination <http://www.peace.org.au/drupal/> accessed 3 July 2009; Wagner conducted a '21st Century church National Apostolic Prophetic Conference' in Brisbane to promote the apostolic model in February 2000 which was received some Baptist interest.

⁸⁰ This material was surveyed in a series of articles in the short-lived Australian theological journal, *Anvil: A Baptist Quarterly*, September 1968 to June 1969; see also Thorwald Lorenzen, 'Baptism and Church Membership.'

⁸¹ Parker, *Strange Bedfellows*, 14.

only ‘small-b Baptists’, naively thinking that it is possible to be simply a ‘Christian’ without any historical, spiritual or organisational links.⁸²

So it seems the Baptist vision has not yet attracted widespread support from mainline churches in the way that other once innovative movements, such as the charismatic renewal, social responsibility and Christian unity, have done. Yet there is a basis for wider acceptance in the fact that it is accepted broadly by so many evangelicals globally.⁸³ Within the Baptist community, there have been many changes in thinking and practice which seem to indicate extensive departures from the historical ideals, But there are still many people and churches who value their heritage, at least in broad terms, and who have deep concerns about the direction and state of the church.⁸⁴ However, denominational officials often do not seem to recognize this, nor do they seem to have the ability or vision to lead their people forward.

Yet Baptists are a significant part of the Christian community, with anecdotal and statistical evidence suggesting that church ‘swappers’ (both people and pastors) who find their way to Baptist churches from other denominations do so because they are seeking a middle-of-the-road group where they can have freedom to express and develop their biblical faith in a contemporary form.⁸⁵ These characteristics probably contribute to the fact that Baptists are stronger, more representative of community demographics and more active when compared with mainline denominations than official census figures and community perceptions might indicate.⁸⁶

But this position needs to be guarded carefully. For example, our sectarian or separatist past is still felt to be a problem for some Baptists, who therefore seek to become identified more as ‘church’ by energetically identifying themselves as community-oriented and culturally-relevant. However, after a few decades of

⁸² http://www.taboradelaide.com/courses/ministry_baptcent.php;
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0NXG/is_1_35/ai_94160867/;
<http://www.crossover.net.au/content/documents/GymeaBaptistMissionChurchprofile.pdf>;
<http://www.biblicistblog.com/?cat=13> (accessed 3 July 2009)

⁸³ The World Evangelical Alliance claims that there about 420 million evangelical Christians worldwide (<http://www.worldangelicals.org/aboutwea/> accessed 22 June 2009).

⁸⁴ See, for example, <http://neobaptist.com/about/>.

⁸⁵ The National Church Life Survey 1991 showed that 37 per cent of Baptist attenders came from other denominations (especially the mainline denominations), although there was a large outward flow as well (especially to Pentecostal churches) (Philip J. Hughes, *The Baptists in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Services, 1996), 64; See also, John Bellamy, Peter Kaldor, and the NCLS Team, *National Church Life Survey: Initial Impressions* (Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 2002); Peter Kaldor et al, *Views from the Pews: Australian church attenders speak out* (Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 1995), 106.

⁸⁶ The Baptist Union of Queensland claims a weekly attendance of 27,000 (<http://www.qb.com.au/page.aspx?id=20>), more than twice the reported membership, and about a third of the census figure, which is 1.9% of the state’s population. (<http://home.pacific.net.au/~dparker/qbstats.htm>) (accessed 25 June 2009).

crusading by denominational and other leaders in this direction, it seems that a conservative change may be on the way.⁸⁷

Then again the recent significant changes to the structure of the church, which are presbyterial and episcopal in direction, need to be considered in the light of history. If the 'Baptist movement began precisely as an alternative ecclesiology,'⁸⁸ then changes in this area which appear to take us away from the original position need to be well founded theologically rather than simply arising out of a drive for effectiveness and efficiency, even when couched piously in terms of mission.

With their heritage and acceptability, Australian Baptists have the opportunity and responsibility to develop strongly within the framework of the Kingdom of God, working with as many as will recognize the Lordship of Christ. Whereas some think this can be done on a generic, non-specific biblical basis, history suggests that it needs to be much more intentional and informed if it is to be effective comprehensively and over time. The biblical, theological and spiritual credentials of the Baptist vision show that it has the qualities to achieve this goal, and the potential to sustain the Christian mission and witness on into the future.

The Baptist vision also has a contribution to make to wider Australian society with a conviction about the worth and value of human life, and a means to achieve personal and social transformation by the power of God in Christ. Its strong moral understanding and qualities are sorely needed in the world that we face today. Its convictions about religious freedom should be heard in our multi-cultural and multi-religious society which is facing potentially explosive conditions. Similarly, Baptists have convictions and a practical record that should enable them to tackle with confidence the modern church-state situation with all its legal and bureaucratic complexities.

Their emphasis on the Lordship of Christ has historically been focused in areas of personal spirituality (especially in relation to the witness involved in baptism) and the pattern of authority for local churches (in contrast with external state and ecclesiastical authorities). But in the present era, it needs also be turned outward to the pressing issues of social, political and other areas of life. Baptists need to take their place in calling once more for the radical Lordship of Christ to be experienced over the dark 'principalities and powers' that so characterise our time, which are as serious a threat to humanity and the Kingdom of God as in the 17th century, the 1930s or the 1960s.

⁸⁷ In May 2009, a denominational leader addressing an assembly referred to the value of reading pietistic books such as Roy Hession's 'The Calvary Road' (1950) and quoted with almost passionate approval the old gospel song, 'This world is not my home' (D. Loder, State of the Union address to Baptist Union of Queensland Assembly 22 May 2009).

⁸⁸ Heim, 'Baptismal recognition and the Baptist Churches,' 154f.

Baptists' celebrated claim to be a 'Bible-based' church also needs to be re-visited. In the past, it too has been used in the battle over the locus of authority in the church (in opposition to tradition, the church, or even scholars), and especially as a source of doctrine, often in a highly controversial and soul-destroying pedantic rationalistic manner. But as these kinds of issues become less relevant, and as people seek for life and hope in a confusing world, Baptists must turn again to Scripture as the 'living and abiding Word of God' (1 Peter 1:23) which is the channel of nurture, divine empowerment and hope and the sacrament of the presence of God.

From our perspective today, the world of 1609 seems a strange place—Kepler and Galileo were only just beginning to teach us about the way the planets behaved, and Newton had not yet appeared on the scene with his understanding of gravity and machines! Yet, as James Leo Garrett⁸⁹ reminds us, many of the issues that our forebears discussed are still relevant (including the nature and extent of salvation, the authority and interpretation of Scripture, Christology, Eschatology). Garrett also points out that there are likely to be new issues to face, some of which arise from our multi-cultural globalised world (like ecumenism and relations with other faiths), as well as those of a more domestic kind (such as church structure and the ordinances)

So there is plenty of reason for Baptists to take a lead, working with as many as will join them in good will, to continue pressing on towards the goal.

⁸⁹ Garrett, 'At 400 years, theological distinctions define, divide Baptists.'

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