



Identifying the Baptist DNA

Mapping a 21st Century Global Baptist Identity - Part 2

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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 Lumpur¹ 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 400th 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.²

Bill Leonard is also extremely pessimistic about Baptist identity – the opening chapter of his *Baptist Ways*³ 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 Kingdom⁴

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.⁵

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

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

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

⁴ 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.

⁵ ‘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 13th is: “Being Baptist is messy, controversial and divisive.”⁶ Walter Shurden’s *The Baptist Identity*⁷ 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 document⁸ 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.⁹

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

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

⁸ Available at http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/FO1982_111_en.pdf

⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

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

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

¹¹ 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*.¹² 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 4th 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.

¹² 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 6th and 7th, 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 Census¹³, 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.”¹⁴

¹³ 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 2nd 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 6th nationally and 5th for the state in size of church constituency.

¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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 histories¹⁷ 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 detailed information in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*¹⁸. 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*.¹⁹ 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*²⁰, 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.

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

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

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

²⁰ 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.²¹ 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 400th 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.²² 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.²³

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.²⁴

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

²² 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.

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

²⁴ 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.”²⁵ 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.

²⁵ 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.²⁶

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

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.

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

²⁷ 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

²⁸ 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"²⁹

²⁹ "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.”³⁰

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.³¹

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.³²

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 out³³ 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”.³⁴ 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.

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

³¹ “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.

³² “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.

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

³⁴ 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