

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

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

© David Parker Brisbane [dparker@pacific.net.au](mailto:dparker@pacific.net.au)

### Introduction and Preliminaries

#### Baptist Identity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For example,

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

#### New approaches needed

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

## Scope

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

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

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

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

## Methodology and approach

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

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

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

## Minefield

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

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

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

## I Traditional approach to Baptist Distinctives

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

## Definite lists of theological principles

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Causative factors

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### No definite list

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

### The Ad Hoc List

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

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

### The Integrated list

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Identifying the Driving Force

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Product Branding and Franchise**

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

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

### **Faulty Theological Assumptions**

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

### **Pragmatically annoying**

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

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

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

## **II Contemporary approach**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Transparency and transferability**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### III A Reality Check Please

#### Checking with empirical Data

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

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

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

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

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

#### Strategies

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

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

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

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

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

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

Whatever the process, the aim is to:-

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

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

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

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

## IV Using the Findings

### Value of a clear view of Baptist Identity

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

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

### What do we do with it?

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

Various approaches are possible

- defining Baptists by contrast (rigid sectarian denominationalism)

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

## Implications

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

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

## Conclusion and Proposal

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

## Appendix Proposal for HIC Project

### Introduction

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

### I Importance and value of the topic

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

Frame the topic and terms of investigation

Anticipated outcomes delineated

### II Collecting Data

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

### III Synthesis

Synthesise above data into workable categories

### IV Analysis

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

### V Conclusion

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

### VI Implications and Implementation

Promulgate findings as indicated above

## Appendix: BWA HIC Statement 1989

### Preamble

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

### The Scriptures

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

### What is the Gospel?

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

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

### What is the Church?

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

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

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

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

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

### What is Discipleship?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Baptists are:

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