

Identifying the Baptist DNA - Global Baptist Identity

Part 3 - July 2013

Paper for BWA Heritage and Identity Commission, July 2013

by David Parker, Brisbane, Australia 4 June 2013

I Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II Up-dates

NCLS – Baptists in Queensland 2011

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

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

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

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

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

New Zealand

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

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

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

III The Baptist Way

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

Robert Johnson

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

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

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

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

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

Stephen Holmes

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

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

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

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

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

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

IV BWA – Dr Craig Sherouse and Dr Neville Callam

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

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

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

He replied³ more in personal terms, *especially in view of the very great diversity existing today*, stating that the Baptist position on baptism was “the most faithful to the sacred scriptures of the church.” He explained that he felt there had been considerable progress in recent years in reconciling understandings of believer’s baptism and infant baptism through putting both into the context of initiation into Christ and the church, but that this did not rule out the necessity for our witness to believer’s baptism.

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

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

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

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

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

³ Personal emails, Dr N Callam, 31 May 2013

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

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

V Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

END

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Complete this sentence:

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