

Queensland Baptists and Baptism

By David Parker ©

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I Situation

This paper has been sparked off by two recent developments – first, moves to change the BUQ Constitution at two recent assemblies, and then, in between, a report of discussions by the GS and RCs about baptism statistics in Queensland and suggested action in response.

1. Constitution change at Assemblies 2016, 2017

A motion was introduced first at the 2016 Assembly by the BUQ leadership stipulating that BUQ would officially recognize the rights of the churches to determine who would be members of their churches, whether they held to traditional closed membership or to open membership. A second change was that only people baptised as believers by immersion as per the Baptist Union doctrinal statement could be nominated as delegates to the Assembly. This would reinstate a provision dropped in 2003 but first introduced in 1899 after an objection was lodged when an open membership church was more or less inadvertently admitted to the BUQ.

As soon as the motion was put in 2016, there was vigorous debate, indicating delegates had come very well prepared for the situation. The main concerns were that basic Baptist principles were likely to be undermined (especially the autonomy of the local church and the doctrine of believers' baptism by immersion), and that there would be an intolerable and odious situation where there were two kinds of delegates and churches. Procedurally there was also an unsuccessful move to split the double barrelled motion on the grounds that there were two different issues involved. After some agitated debate the motion was withdrawn by the leadership, who announced that the matter would be re-submitted by the Board at a later date.

That took place a year later, in 2017, but no further information was given between the two assemblies about it. Furthermore, the details were announced only a very short time in advance so the churches were given almost no opportunity to consider their position. As it turned out, the new wording was exactly the same as the first, but the explanation was a little different. This time it was stated that the purpose of the proposed change was purely to clarify uncertainties in the wording of the BUQ Constitution and that it would make no difference in practice whether or not the motion was passed (apart from the need for additional paperwork to certify the qualifications of delegates). The motion was then passed unanimously (I believe) and certainly without any debate at all, despite repeated attempts by the chair to encourage discussion from the floor.

So it was a purely bureaucratic matter without any intention for it to be the occasion for discussion of the theology and practice of baptism and church membership.

By way of summary, the Constitution provided:

- In 1980 'immersion of believers is the only true Christian Baptism' was dropped
- In 2003 church members are to be so baptised; Assembly delegates are to be church members
- In 2017 church members do not have to be baptised but Assembly delegates must be baptised

2. Statistics of Baptisms in Qld

The second item giving rise to this paper was the report in GSUD 9/2/2017 of discussions by the General Superintendent and Regional Coordinators about the baptism statistics of 2016. These numbered 784, which it was stated represented a growth of only 2% over 5 years. Some of the smaller churches ranked higher than the larger ones in the rate of baptisms, but there were about 18 churches which did not have a single baptism in that period. The report aired some reasons for the low figures. Aside from poor reporting, it was said that baptism is either over-valued or under-valued and people are not challenged about it. The article concluded by urging pastors and churches to be more energetic in putting into practice the Great Commission (Mt 28:16-20) and its call to baptise.

The situation

It is not clear what exactly sparked off the process to change the Constitution, but the GSUD discussion about the numbers of baptisms arose from the regular process of gathering church statistics. In any case, neither of these instances was caused by or has resulted in a desire to examine Queensland Baptist beliefs about baptism in a way that would develop a dynamic theology to empower churches to reverse the poor statistics or to harness the obvious feeling about the matter expressed at the 2016 Assembly. In fact, there has been apparently no such discussion amongst Baptists in Queensland for a very long time.

The last time the topic was raised was in the 1990s. In 1994, the City Tabernacle Baptist Church moved at the Assembly to restrict Baptist Union membership to closed membership churches, but this effort failed. (In support of their position, a brief informal paper on the topic by Rev G Muller was circulated by the Tabernacle. Then in 1997, the retiring GS, SW Solomon stated that in his opinion, the 'future of Baptists of Queensland hangs in the balance'. He said in view of this, 'policies of inclusion rather than exclusion' should be considered, specifically 'open membership within limited boundaries' (and the ordination of women!) There was no formal response to these remarks or any action.

During the earlier years, there were occasional efforts to change the constitution (JE White, *A Fellowship of Service*, 1977, Baptist Union of Queensland, pp 82, 182ff), but otherwise, it is necessary to go back a century to find any sustained discussion on the matter (when the above mentioned compromise clause was added to the Constitution.) This was a time when open membership was almost universally practiced in South Australia and in churches in WA influenced thereby, which was in sharp contrast to the positions held in the other Australian states.

In Queensland, open membership churches were very few in number— Taringa Union, and then the first Beaudesert church (which did not survive), followed by some of the Rockhampton suburban churches; there was a provision for Home Mission churches in rural areas to allow non-Baptists to join.

There was some discussion in the late 19th century when the Churches of Christ established themselves first in Queensland, in some cases drawing people from Baptist churches on the grounds, inter alia, of their own distinctive baptismal theology. There were several instances of debate at the local level at the time, but there have not been any official discussions with the Churches of Christ since. There was some sharing at the denominational level in the early 2000s, and for a time a joint Churches of Christ/Baptist church existed at Charters Towers. (David Parker, 'Baptist Relations with Churches of Christ', QB Forum, Aug 2006 No 63 pp 3-8 <http://www.dparker.net.au/bapcc.htm>)

Similarly, in the early times there were several vociferous interchanges over baptism between Baptists and Paedo-Baptist Protestants in various local situations. This was often provoked by the expansion of Baptists into new areas, which was regarded by some established churches as proselytising (at the time, the major denominations enjoyed the vast majority of the nominal Christian population). Some Baptist pastors and laymen were up to the challenge, and gave as good as they received!

In the wider church and academic world, there have been major theological discussions in the post-war period involving influential figures such as Karl Barth and Oscar Cullman, and extensive ecumenical discussions of the subject (notably to do with the publication of the Lima Report on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry in 1982). But none of this has apparently produced any significant responses from Queensland Baptists. Further afield, many English churches are either open membership or do not place much stress on baptism, although other UK churches are different. (Christopher J Ellis, *Baptist Worship Today*, London: Baptist Union, 1999; 50%-60% of more than 1800 churches surveyed).

The original constitution of the Baptist Union stated that churches could join if they met four conditions, one of which was 'the immersion of the believer in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost as the only Christian baptism.' (1877 Constitution BAQ). The current constitution has the statement of belief dating from 1889 (but actually introduced to Queensland in 1882) as 'Minimal Doctrinal Statement' under the general heading of 'Declaration of Principles'.

In 2001 a set of expanded, non-binding 'Guidelines for belief and practice' was also adopted, which includes the following on baptism:

9. About Baptism and the Lord's Supper and the Church

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the only two ceremonies given by Jesus Christ through Scripture to be observed by the church for all ages. We call them "ordinances" as they have been ordained by Christ. We do not call them "sacraments" because they do not convey Christ's salvation which is conveyed directly by the Holy Spirit in response to the individual's faith.

Baptism is the immersion of believers upon their repentance and profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism pictures the connecting of the believer with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. The Lord's Supper is a memorial of thanksgiving for the sacrifice of the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Matrix

It is important to clarify some of the aspects of baptism involved in our situation. Unfortunately, the verbal introduction to the 2016 Assembly motion only mentioned one form of 'open membership' as an alternative to standard closed membership, viz, that arising from physical disability or adverse medical conditions which would make full immersion difficult.

However, the situation is more complex than that. It includes churches where baptism is not required for membership at all, and those where exceptions are made for non-immersionist believer's baptism, or where non-believer's baptism including paedo-baptism, may be considered acceptable. In some a lesser form of 'associate' membership is offered, with limited privileges of participation in the life of the church. These alternatives are for people coming into an existing Baptist church from some other church environment. For those within the existing church, usually the only option is standard closed membership (or the physical exception).

It is also the case that no matter what provisions or allowances might be made for alternative entry into church membership, Baptist churches nearly universally hold to the exclusive practice and teaching of believer's baptism by immersion. It is understood that those granted membership on the basis of some variant will understand this and accept it in good faith without trying to undermine the church's position (and hopefully come to 'see the light' soon!).

There are other possibilities as well – including 'union churches' where paedo- and believer's baptism are both practiced, and cases where the previous baptism of a person may be discounted entirely on the grounds that it was purely nominal and indiscriminate.

Proposal

Some situations encountered within Baptist churches in Queensland indicate a low key approach to baptism and especially its link with church membership which might account for the statistics quoted earlier.

However, there are some potentially useful positions. In this paper I want to take account of some of these, and propose two interrelated lines of thinking which can lead to clarification of the current situation and the development of an empowering theology. One involves studying again what led to the creation of the Baptist movement in the first place; the other involves taking seriously the Baptist dedication to biblical authority.

II Status Quo

The first step in the process is to analyse and try to clarify the current position of Baptists in Queensland on baptism by surveying the data available. We could try to refer to dynamic material such as sermons, training classes and testimonies or to use surveys and focus groups, but in this case, we are working with available documentary sources, both current and historic.

Data sources

Here is a listing of some of the most useful (some overlap occurs):

- Generic explanatory and informational material on Baptist beliefs, which states the overall generally accepted theology and practice – such as BIQ, Baptist Beliefs etc (which is some ways is a simplified version of standard Baptist theologies and confessions)
- Discussions at the official level, eg, those mentioned above in the 1990s, and the late 19th century
- Official BUQ documents
 - the Declaration of principles (first appearing in 1882 and 1899 and still in use)
 - Guideline Statement of Belief (2001) (more verbose; it is strongly anti-sacramental, which is ironic since the most common traditional statements define baptism strongly as a profession of faith and a sign of a commitment to Christ, which is very similar to the literal meaning of '*sacramentum*', a soldier's oath of allegiance).
- Articles and reports published in the *Queensland Baptist* and other places, which can include biblical, theological and historical articles, sermons and addresses, Bible studies and personal testimonies – see my article on this, Baptism, our signature belief, QB Feb 2016, pp 32-33; and the sermon by TJ Malyon, 1911
- Occasional papers and statements: examples: Glenn Muller paper, 1994; Darren Clark essay 2006, offering a helpful coverage of the situation historically and locally up to the date of writing
- Local church constitutions – particularly statements of faith, and material on baptism and church membership – this is instructive and provides some potentially useful possibilities.

All of this can be set against the background of material from other Baptist sources – especially cases where issues similar to the focus of this paper were tackled (such as NSW in the 1990s; a paper published on the Canberra BC website). We may also include early Baptist material and the large volume of material emanating from UK Baptists in recent years which we will examine below.

The material from Queensland is quite limited. I tried to give a taste of some of the personal and local church attitudes for a brief period at the end of the 19th century in my short QB article (QB Feb 2016). Here is another – a family testimony, albeit from a migrant family's perspective as they arrived in Queensland:

They having been born again of the spirit of God, and been buried with Him in baptism, rising up to walk in newness of life, whilst in the land of their birth, continued in the Faith, walking in the fear of the Lord (Les Ball, 'The Soren Jensen Family', QB Forum July 1995, p4)

Some other useful examples will be referred to later. However, one striking exception is the body of local church constitutions. As they are, ostensibly, the official documents reflecting current belief and practice, considerable attention will now be given to them.

Analysis of Church Constitutions

For this paper, a study has been made of about 160 of these, which covers most of the constituted member churches of the Baptist Union of Queensland. The major exception is those labelled as LOTE churches in the official QB Directory, about 30 in number. These LOTE churches generally are believed to be more conservative on baptism, and especially its close relationship with church membership.

Disclaimer

The information is presented here in a simplified and preliminary form. I am using it as a general indication of the range of positions taken by Baptist churches in Queensland and not as a strict statistical or legal analysis. For this reason, I am not generally identifying the churches mentioned. Some constitutions contain multiple statements about baptism and church membership (which are not necessarily consistent) and may therefore fall into more than one of the categories to be mentioned below.

Caveats

There are some other caveats to observe in using these Constitutions.

- The main one is that some of them are unusable (10x) because they are unclear, unspecific or contradictory.
- Of the rest, the wording is sometimes not very helpful for our topic because it may be only generalised (eg adherence to the doctrines but no procedure or rules) or put in a negative form (eg certain conditions do not exclude a person from consideration), ranking of alternatives not specified, vague ('may be permitted') or inappropriate ('submitting to Holy Spirit')
- Some are apparently serious and intentional statements, but others employ perhaps only stock phrasing
- Another problem is that the relationships between the documentary statements, their interpretation in the local scene and the practice of the churches is unknown.
- Others are loose in the constitution drafting – eg, one refers to baptism by immersion but has no reference to faith;

Another just uses the word, adult – *be baptised or have been baptised, or have undergone a baptismal rite from another recognised Christian tradition as an adult or by their own personal choice with an understanding of its significance as a public confession of faith, and agree that Baptism by full immersion is the Scriptural model and is the practice of this church.*

(see also another - only new converts to be baptised by immersion, not others);

Physical or other Disability

One category of membership can be dealt with at the outset. About 9 churches state that in cases of physical disability, age or health issues preventing immersion (and even emotional issues – one mentions 'mental' issues- Kruger), alternate arrangements can be considered. Although not usually stated, this would include affusion (*note this word is sometimes mangled - being replaced by 'effusion' – which is defined as either liquid spurting through a narrow orifice or verbal diarrhoea!*), sprinkling or even no baptism at all (only the intention).

It is also assumed that many of those churches which do not make this provision explicit would in fact be sympathetic to the position, even if they might have some concerns about contravening the explicit requirements of their constitution. It might be worth noting that churches should not be too hurried to provide alternatives - out of respect for the dignity of people.

Associate (limited) Membership

Another simple option may mentioned here, offered by 6 churches, is Associate membership – ie, switchers from other denominations, whatever their baptismal situation is, who do not wish to consider re-baptism are eligible for associate membership. This allows them full participation in the life of the church except for holding certain offices and not being able to vote on major issues (such as pastoral calls and property matters). However, associate membership is usually not an option for pastors or certain church officers.

We can now turn to the majority of churches and the most common positions.

Classic Closed Membership – Believers' Baptism by full immersion as a symbol and profession of faith

Almost all of the 160 churches show that their basic position is traditional closed membership. However just over 100 make this the sole and exclusive condition of church membership, while the others allow additional and/or alternative ways of entry.

Of the churches making closed membership the only option, the doctrinal statement used most commonly is the Baptist Union of Queensland Declaration of Principles, adopted in 1899 (or even 1882/3) from Victoria for use in the Baptist Union constitution, and also included in the model constitution for a local church.

4.1 (i) The two ordinances of the Lord Jesus Christ - namely, Baptism and the Lord's Supper which are of perpetual obligation. Baptism being the immersion of Believers upon the profession of their Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and a symbol of the fellowship of the regenerate in His death, burial and resurrection;

This version is still current (although titled differently), but in 2001/4 an additional statement was also introduced in a set of "Guidelines for belief and practice". This wording is used by a few newer churches (either verbatim or modified).

9. About Baptism and the Lord's Supper and the Church

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the only two ceremonies given by Jesus Christ through Scripture to be observed by the church for all ages. We call them "ordinances" as they have been ordained by Christ. We do not call them "sacraments" because they do not convey Christ's salvation which is conveyed directly by the Holy Spirit in response to the individual's faith. Baptism is the immersion of believers upon their repentance and profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism pictures the connecting of the believer with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

The Constitutions include a variety of ways of describing the significance or meaning of this classic view baptism, including noting that it is a profession of faith or an act of obedience, and that those being baptised follow the example and teaching of Jesus and the pattern of the NT church.

There is different wording in some constitutions for 'symbol of the fellowship', and the 2004 version uses the term 'picturing'. It is not clear what is really meant in some cases, and whether the differences are meant to be significant.

Similarly, the link between baptism and church membership is not always clear or close, and in some cases is non-existent. Phrases such as 'encouraged' to be baptised or to join the church, or 'ought to be baptised' or 'counselled to be baptised' are often found.

More generally, sometimes there is no apparent connection between what these documents say about the significance of baptism for the church on the one hand, and its significance for individuals, on the other.

Act of Obedience

Overall, this group of documents express the classic symbolic view of baptism which has been described by Timothy George as 'theological minimalism and atomistic individualism.' (Cross, 'Should we take Peter at his word (Acts 2:38)? Recovering a Baptist Baptismal Sacramentalism' (Oxford, Regent's Park College, 2010), p 21, quoting Timothy George, 'The Reformed Doctrine of Believer's Baptism, Interpretation 47:3 (July 1993), p 251) Similarly, Larry Kreitzer refers to the 'individualizing tendency' that is 'born out of the spirit of our age' (Cross, Peter at his Word, p 23, quoting Larry Kreitzer, Gospel according to John, (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 1990), p 82.

In this view, baptism is seen as an action separate from conversion and looking back to it. Baptism has its own discrete meaning as an act of obedience, both in terms of the act itself and also by the way it is performed.

It is important to note that it is the obedience which gives it its value. One constitution emphasises this aspect by speaking of it a 'necessary step' in the spiritual growth of a believer. Three also separate baptism out from the life of the church by stating that the church will 'permit' those believers requesting it to be baptised typically at the discretion of the pastor.

However, it is not clear how baptism as a step of obedience differs from any of the other many steps of obedience that take place in the life of a believer, except that it is expressly and distinctively taught in the NT by dominical authority.

Since baptism is seen as a discrete act of obedience, it is not surprising that anecdotally, some have stated that to insist on it for church membership as in the traditional closed membership situation, in contrast to simply accepting a profession of faith, is a case of raising a man-made barrier in the same category as the legalism of the Pharisees.

So we can sum up this section in the words of George Neal,

One of the strange ironies of recent Church history is that Baptists, who insist on the baptism of believers only, have often emptied the rite of any significance. They have accepted that it did not in itself do anything; it was just a dramatic, symbolic act that declared what had already happened in repentance and conversion. One became a Christian through one's confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The role and work of the Holy Spirit was in leading a person to see Christ as Lord and Saviour. From that moment he filled and inspired that person to live an obedient and Christ-like life. But God did little or nothing in the baptism itself.

George Neal, 'The recovery of baptism', *Baptist Times* 24 April 2008, p. 12, quoted by AR Cross, Baptist World Alliance Forum on Baptism 2: Saved through baptism: A Sacramental Baptist View), p 6

Open Membership

At the opposite end of the spectrum we have open membership, where in the strict sense only a profession of faith is required for membership. There is no reference at all to baptism, meaning that the person could be unbaptised or baptised in some other way. Typically, these churches do teach and practice baptism of believers by immersion only, constituting them as Baptist churches. Anecdotal evidence from the past suggested that most members became baptised in due course, but that may not be true at present.

In Queensland, the original church formed in 1855, Brisbane Baptist Church (Wharf Street/City Tabernacle), initially accepted paedobaptists as members to accommodate the Congregationalists from the United Evangelical Church out of which both churches emerged. However, when this need passed, the Baptist Church reverted to traditional closed membership. So it was not technically an open membership church.

It was Taringa Baptist Church in 1897 that was the first clear case of open membership. Although called a 'union' church because of the multi-denominational composition of its early membership, it practiced only believer's baptism by immersion. Its statement said,

'Only such persons shall be eligible for membership, who satisfy the Church that they are sincerely endeavouring to do the will of God by following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ.'

(Later these words were inserted 'who have made confession of Jesus Christ, and who satisfy ...')

The church adopted closed membership in 1967 (apart from one earlier pastorate, 1939-46), but today is closed membership but also offering multiple paths to membership.

The first church at Beaudesert, 1906, was also open membership (original documents unavailable), but that church ceased operation in 1921. In 2006 Clark identified some, but their current constitutions do not support this view.

The QB office is apparently not aware of any open membership churches.

Currently there appear to be 3 churches which are open each one requiring only a profession of faith for membership.

There may be others identical with or closed to this position, but their statements are hard to interpret (eg Hervey Bay not clearly stated). There are some that might be described as 'nearly open'!

Some churches which fall into a later category also offer open membership as an alternative membership path in that they will accept a profession of faith as an alternative option to closed membership.

'R.P.B.' - Recognition of Other forms of baptism

We now turn to churches which do require baptism for membership but recognize forms other than the normal Baptist one. This is a complex group which is difficult to categorise because of the great variety of options and the abovementioned limitations of church constitutions.

Altogether, there are about 46 or 50 such churches, and the following categories can be discerned.

1) Non-immersion Believers' Baptism

One category, consisting of about 11 recognize as valid a prior non-immersionist form of baptism involving a profession of faith. If this description is taken at face value, it is a form of believer's baptism but one that does not insist on the full symbolism of immersion.

While understandable in some contexts, it remains a diminished form of the rite. A significant aspect of baptism (and communion too) is that it employs physical experiences as a means to spiritual growth. As John Colwell states,

'[W]e are physical beings inhabiting a physical world. God has chosen to mediate his presence and action through physical means.' (Colwell, *Promise and Presence* (Wipf and Stock, 2011), p. 125).

Thus, the classic Baptist position using full immersion has been strongly argued typically on symbolic, biblical and historical grounds involving an appeal to obedience and faithfulness. But instinctively, it is possibly realised that to weaken the material aspect is to reduce the rite, perhaps beyond redemption. Cross says,

In fact, to deny that God employs material means, the things of creation, to convey his grace to humanity, to separate the spiritual from the material realm, is to succumb ... to a modern form of gnosticism

We could go further and follow Curtis Freeman by raising the sceptre of 'incipient Marcionism'! (Curtis W. Freeman, "To Feed Upon by Faith": Nourishment from the Lord's Table', in AR Cross and PE Thompson, *Baptist Sacramentalism*, (Paternoster, 2003), p. 204)

From a practical perspective, James F White puts it this way:

If our concern is to show forth by actions what God does, then sprinkling ... is most insufficient (unless we have a very anemic doctrine of God). Pouring is somewhat better if the water can be seen and heard as it splashes. Dipping ... or immersing ... is clearly best. If we are willing to let the act speak for itself, we will not bury it under verbiage but actually wash people. (Introduction to Christian Worship (Abingdon, 1991), p 217)

William Willimon says, 'Water should be seen, heard, and experienced in order to open up the rich baptismal symbolism.' (W H Willimon, *Word, Water, Wine and Bread*, Judson, 1980), p 121. The other alternative is to go the way of the Quakers with their radical interior spirituality. Even the Salvation Army, who do not practice baptism or Communion, have plenty of other physical expressions of faith to make up!

2) 'Another form of baptism'

A further category comprises the churches, about 6 in number, that do not require people to be re-baptised by immersion if they are committed to 'another form of baptism'. It is not clear how different these 'other forms' might be. Also it is not clear if they involve any profession of faith, or if indeed they have any other form of validity.

However, one or two churches do specifically recognize earlier nominal or paedobaptisms if the person now validates that baptism with a confession of faith (Taringa and one other. To understand fully this process would require a long excursion into the complex history and theology of Christian initiation.

3) Conscientious objection to baptism

The final category are those churches, 7 in number, which explicitly allow for 'conscientious objection' – people who for the sake of their consciences do not wish to change their baptismal views, yet they wish to become members of a Baptist church! It is not always clear if this includes people not baptised at all or only those baptised in some other way.

Not that this may only be another way of describing those in the above categories.

In some churches, this option only provides a path to associate membership so they could be included in the above-mentioned group.

In these cases, the prospective member does want to be a member of church whose views they do not hold, but they must agree that they understand and support the Baptist stance on believer's baptism by immersion as the norm.

This avoids the issue of re-baptism, which is, of course, highly contentious in normal ecumenical circles. However, the classic Baptist position (since the beginning) has been to hold that any other form of baptism except believer's baptism is no baptism at all, which means there the sensitive question of re-baptism simply does not arise, at least in the minds of good Baptists!

Evaluation

As indicated, a number of the constitutions are complex and confusing regarding the forms of baptism accepted and the conditions for church membership.

The authority for admitting exceptions is also concerning. In many cases, there is no objective set of conditions but applicants are approved individually by the pastor and/or leadership on an ad hoc basis. Low key wording such as 'may be considered' or 'not excluded from consideration' is also common. A typical statement is that those holding to other baptismal doctrines/practices will 'not be denied' membership but will have the Baptist belief 'explained' to them – presumably with the hope that they will change their views, or at least be aware of the reasons for the church's practice.

Thus, while these cases may show a warmth of fellowship to people switching from other churches and a desire to avoid unnecessary sectarianism, they do not fall into the pattern of 'generous hospitality' to other Christians suggested by certain writers in this field. GR Beasley Murray suggested, for example, that it should be a matter of routine that genuinely baptised switchers should be accepted cordially upon profession of faith. George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1972 [1962]), p. 392; George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 86):

Some Queensland constitutions do refer specifically to members of other denominations, and this may be particularly appropriate in particular situations such as rural and remote areas where there are few other churches. This was a position which Mead referred to in rural SA (see QB Sept 1899, p 115). But this is quite different from opening the door to ordinary 'switchers'.

There is another matter of concern. It is not always certain that the variations from the norm in baptismal and church membership belief and practice are used only as a very last resort, or whether they are regarded as 'equal opportunity' alternatives and offered freely to people. On the contrary, there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that Solomon's plea for a more inclusive position has been heeded. (eg RC confirmation)

More generally, it may be observed that in the past switchers would frequently have been people from churches practicing infant baptism. However that situation is less likely to occur in the future. Other options will be people from other broadly evangelical churches, the completely unchurched and people from other world faiths.

Baptism, Holy Spirit and church

The above is an attempt to analyse the current situation in terms of the admission of people from various backgrounds to the membership of the church. But another way of looking at the data is to see what it reflects about the meaning and significance of baptism for the church and for the individual.

Some of the constitutions do reflect interesting and potentially useful approaches for our topic. There are two groups in particular to consider.

The first refers to a connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit. There is just a little evidence of a fully-fledged Pentecostal position holding to baptism in or by the Holy Spirit with tongues following, while another refers to baptism of the Holy Spirit with gifts following. On the contrary, 2 at least present categorically an anti-Pentecostal position. One has the curious statement that to live a proper Christian life, one needs to be ‘baptised in water and submit to the empowering of the Holy Spirit’ so that spiritual gifts may be used to ‘strengthen and encourage the church.’

But in reference to the current topic, one or two speak of conversion and regeneration by the Holy Spirit but others, perhaps 5, go further and speak of a person being incorporated into the church universal by the baptism of the Holy Spirit at conversion. However, crucially, they do not link this to water baptism, which therefore still remains as a separate discrete rite revealing a disturbing disjunction in the church’s theology.

A group of 6 refer to water baptism as the outward expression of an inner experience or in some cases, named as baptism of the Spirit. This seems to be stronger than the typical symbolic statement and are more like the traditional Augustinian and Calvinist definition of ‘sacrament’ as the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. There are in fact some, but very few, usages of the actual word ‘sacrament’ in the Constitutions, but not in conjunction with the inward/outward terminology.

These two insights lead on to the next stage of my paper as we look at ways of developing a dynamic and empowering theology of baptism.

III Solution

Believers’ Baptism – theological integration

There is a view that there are no doctrines, including believers’ baptism, that are unique to Baptists, but what is distinctive is the particular combination of doctrines.

For example, 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). The official BWA book, *We Baptists* (p 22) states, ‘No one doctrine is exclusive to Baptists, but no other group has maintained emphases on all these points in this particular way.’ Our own book, *Baptists in Queensland* (BIQ (2013) 13) says, ‘So, although there are no doctrines which are absolutely unique to Baptists, the denomination has come to be characterised by a particular combination of convictions and emphases.’ Usually there is no special reason offered as to why it is this particular set of doctrines and not others.

However, this notion of a seemingly ad hoc collection of doctrines goes against the theological and historical facts. S Mark Heim puts it this way,

‘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;

To refer to one of the Queensland sources, founding principal of this college, T. J. Malyon took up this matter in his retiring presidential address to the 1911 Queensland Assembly when he spoke of ‘a distinguishing principle which inevitably leads out in various directions.’ He 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. (‘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)

T. Lorenzen also saw the problem but from the obverse side. He stated that for the mainline churches, despite the weight of scholarship that questions the validity of the doctrine 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).

Believers’ Baptism – and the true church

It is important to notice that this was, in fact, the position from the very beginning. The quest of our founders leading up to Amsterdam 1609 was the search for the true church. It was not simply a matter of revising or rejecting existing forms of church or modes of baptism because of some dissatisfaction with them individually, and then choosing some other preferred alternative.

John Smyth regarded infant baptism as no baptism at all, ie, false baptism, because it was without faith. Therefore the state church of which it was an integral part was no true church (in fact, it was ‘the Beast’!).

‘we have also proved that ... true baptisme doth not apertayne to the carnal line, but only to them that are of Abrah. Faith, that is actually believing to justification, & shewing the faith of Abraham by the works of Abrah.’

(Smyth, *Character of the Beast*, p 678 quoted in AR Cross, ‘The adoption of Believer’s Baptism and Baptist Beginnings’, p 17, in AR Cross and N J Wood (eds), *Exploring Baptist Origins* (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2010).

Anthony Cross explains,

For Smyth, the error of infant baptism lay, first, in its separation of the outer rite from the inner transformed life of the believer. ‘For baptisme is not washing with water; but it is the baptisme of the Spirit, the confession of the mouth & the washing with water.’

Cross continues, Smyth 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 especialy’.

Cross concludes, ‘This is why he and others adopted believer’s baptism.’

(emphasis added, in AR Cross and NJ Wood, editors, *Exploring Baptist Origins*, Regents Park College, 2010, pp 18, 19)

In the context of the day, to deny church baptism was, of course, socially subversive and a state crime, which is why Helwys, Smyth and the others had to flee England in the first place.

So ecclesiology is the fundamental distinguishing basis of Baptist belief. Believer’s baptism does not merely define or characterise the church, but *constitutes* it. By conversion and baptism of Spirit and water, we are united with Christ and therefore with his people, creating the church. Everything else follows from this – the Lordship of Christ, priesthood of all believers, congregational government, the doctrine of ministry and ordination, and the worship and mission of the church.

As noted before, some of the Queensland Baptist church constitutions include references along these lines which could provide us with a basis for further development. On the other hand, some of the constitutions are the opposite – the linkage between baptism and church is sometimes very loose, or even non-existent – baptism has become a purely personal matter and a discrete part of the individual’s spiritual experience. The separation of baptism from church membership means that baptism is minimized in the life of the church.

The biblical basis for faith-baptism

But this integration of saving faith, baptism and church can be supported from an explicitly biblical basis as well. This is where we turn to our second line of approach. For this we draw upon the insights of the considerable body of writing from British Baptists in recent decades.

As Anthony Cross notes,

... the prevailing individualistic and merely symbolic view of baptism has come under sustained criticism from some of the Baptists’ leading scholars. In Britain, these scholars include H. Wheeler Robinson, George Beasley-Murray, R. E. O. White and Neville Clark, and, more recently, Paul Fiddes and John Colwell. Cross EQ 80.3 (2008) 195-217 at 198

Cross himself is currently the most well-known and prolific exponent of this British position, with multiple publications in the area, the latest being two papers delivered at the BWA in July 2017; his most convenient paper is probably *The Evangelical Sacrament: baptisma semper reformandum*, EQ 80:3 (2008), 195-217, and his most detailed, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament* (Pickwick, 2013).

It is well known that Baptist polemic against other forms of baptismal theology and practice takes a strong line on the biblical warrant for the subjects and the mode of baptism. Thus, it is insisted strongly that such baptism follows the example and express command of Jesus himself as recorded in Scripture, and is based on clear apostolic teaching, especially such passages as Romans 6. Furthermore, it is strongly asserted that this practice and belief that was prevalent in NT church as seen in the Book of Acts. This practice lasted for several centuries until displaced by the force of other developments including the advent of Christendom and views of original sin. In general, it was only recovered by the baptistic churches in the Reformation period and later.

However, it is the contention of these British writers, that this traditional appeal of Baptists to biblical authority and history regarding the subjects and mode of baptism is one sided and incomplete. They argue that the biblical material has much more to say on the topic, and what it says is even more important that what it says about the mode and subjects. This can be summed up in the words of Beasley Murray,

‘In every explicit mention of Baptism [in the New Testament] it is regarded as the supreme moment of our union with Christ in His redemptive acts for us and our consequent reception of the life of the Spirit.’
Cross, *The Evangelical Sacrament*, p 201,

Baptism and salvation

We can summarise the argument for what has been called ‘faith-baptism’ as follows.

Everywhere in the NT, both in both doctrinal and historical passages, saving faith or conversion, baptism and entry into the church go together. There is no concept of an unbaptised Christian in the NT, and the entire process of salvation is integrated into one sequence – faith/conversion, forgiveness, regeneration, entry to church, reception of and transformation by the Spirit etc.

Beasley Murray has a well-known listing of passages (put into chart form by Cross) which show baptism on the one hand and faith on the other are linked with salvation in all its aspects – forgiveness, justification, union with Christ, being crucified with Christ, death and resurrection, sonship, the Holy Spirit, entry into the church, regeneration and life, the kingdom and eternal life. (Cross, ‘The Evangelical Sacrament’, pp 206-207 chart by Cross of Beasley-Murray material)

Or as Cross states, ‘The full range of the gifts of salvation that are attributed to faith in the New Testament are also attributed to baptism.’ (Cross, *Baptism among Baptists*, p 148)

‘Baptism among Baptists’ in Gordon L. Heath and James D. Dvorak (eds), *Baptism: Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspectives* (McMaster Divinity College Press Theological Study Series, 4; Hamilton, ON: McMaster Divinity College Press/Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), pp. 136-155,

Robert H Stein puts it this way in his detailed examination of this idea:

‘In the experience of becoming a Christian, five integrally related components took place at the same time, usually on the same day: repentance, faith, confession, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, and baptism’,

cf. his ‘Baptism and Becoming a Christian’. See also R.E.O. White, *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960), pp. 189-99. Stein, ‘Baptism in Luke-Acts’, p. 52:

Thus F. F. Bruce can comment on Galatians 3:27, ‘repentance and faith, with baptism in water and reception of the Spirit, followed by first communion, constituted one complex experience of Christian initiation’.

F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1982), 186 – quoted by -----,

This means that there is no case for making baptism a purely personal matter and dividing it off from church membership and renewal of the Holy Spirit under pressure of the prevailing ‘theological minimalism and atomistic individualism’ (Timothy George)

Part for the whole

Sometimes in the NT, one or other of these elements may be referred to without mentioning specifically the others or the whole process. For example, 1 Peter 3:21, Baptism ... now saves you.

In cases like this, we have the figure of speech known as *synecdoche*, where a part is used for the whole (eg, bread is used for food in general). [Another similar figure of speech is metonymy, where the name of an attribute is used for whole thing (eg., crown from king). Thus we speak of the blood or the cross as a way of referring to the saving work of Christ.]

The blessing of an effective sign

Furthermore, these British writers assert that in the NT, baptism is an ‘effective sign’, and ‘a divinely appointed *means of grace*.’ (Cross, *Baptism among Baptists*, 148) They thereby consciously revive the usage of the first era of Baptist life which freely employed the word ‘sacramental’ alongside ‘ordinance’.

However, their usage is carefully nuanced, especially with the insistence that there is no question of the traditional mechanical *ex opere operato* view of baptism in the NT. On the contrary, it is everywhere the faith of the individual that counts (hence the term faith-baptism). That is, in the words of John Colwell, Baptism does ‘not effect...grace; but it is the ordained means through which this grace is effected.’ (in Cross, *The Evangelical Sacrament*: 200)

We may note here that only a very few QB constitutions even mention the word ‘sacrament’, and that the 2004 QB statement explicitly rejected the *ex opere operato* view of ‘sacrament’

The British writers suggests that the current prevalent lop-sided view of the term ‘ordinance’ amongst Baptists gained popularity as a reaction to the renewal of sacramental life stemming from the Catholic revival during the 19th Century, and because of a turn to ‘modernist’ rationalistic, even gnostic, influences which radically separated spirit and matter.

But for some people, the term ‘sacrament’ may still be considered a little difficult due to its associations. Therefore for some, the New Testament term, *mystery*, may be better (although it too has been connected with *sacramentum*).

Alternatively, for Queensland Baptists it may be more helpful to use the common terminology of ‘blessing’ - a real and powerful communication of the grace of God’. In this case, baptism would be understood as ‘a moment for divine activity (that is, when God freely meets us anew *with his gracious blessing*)’.

Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 2003) p 130 referring to BWA *We Baptists* (1999), 27 emphasis added)

Consequences

Therefore, if in the origins of the Baptist movement as well as in the New Testament itself, baptism is ‘the supreme moment of our union with Christ’, then it is clearly of wide-ranging importance not just for the individual but for the church and its life. Some of the statements in constitutions of Queensland Baptist churches give a hint of this, and could well be developed in the light of the case put forward by our British friends. If this understanding was adopted more widely and its consequences followed through, it would strengthen the position of Baptists in Queensland in regard to evangelism, the church and its life and mission.

IV Summary Scenario

Whatever the terminology or practice, a recovery of the importance of baptism in relation to conversion, baptism of the Spirit and incorporation into Christ and his church is needed. At the most basic level, this would hopefully change the poor QB statistics by empowering evangelism, church life and worship. I believe that, at the very least, there is certainly need for many of the churches to clarify their official documents. I would also expect that if an in-depth study were carried out there would also be considerable consequences for our understanding of Communion and more broadly, the church.

But I think this is of high significance on a broader front still.

Missionary context

Much of the inherited understanding about baptism relates to a church context which is no longer relevant. It seems some churches have attempted to adapt to contemporary situations, but, as this study indicates, the results in many cases are less than satisfactory.

It does not appear likely that in Queensland we will ever have the kind of ecumenical situation that exists in the UK (in part at least). There many churches, as an act of Christian hospitality, have enlarged their recognition of each other as members of a fractured Christian movement. However we live in a much more sectarian and closeted Christian context.

Looking at the situation more broadly, we have moved from a context of traditional Christendom into a missionary situation where people coming into our fellowships are increasingly unlikely to have any Christian background – whether they come from families who no longer have the Christian contacts enjoyed by earlier generations or whether than come from some other religious background entirely – or are completely secular. So we are back again in the same kind of stark situation that existed in the first centuries of the Christian era – and in many other areas of the world, in which baptism was the decisive marker of Christian identity.

The current prevalent memorialist position which James E White describes as ‘only a high-level bit of religious education’ or ‘a pious memory exercise’ (*Introduction to Christian Worship*, 1990 p 215) fails to meet the circumstances of this context and does not empower the church or believers to rise to the occasion.

What is needed is a more robust and fecund view of baptism as ‘a yoking of oneself to a specific gathering of the Body of Christ, not an abstracted, free-floating initiation into religion in general or an occasion for mere self-affirmation.’ (W Willimon, *Word, Water, Wine and Bread* 1980 p 122)

I would like to end with piece of verse – the 2nd hymn in the baptism section in the hymn book used at Taringa in the 1890s, George Rawson’s (1807-89) ‘Mighty mystery’ (Psalms and Hymns, 695, CM).

Baptised into His Death – Rom 6:8

A mighty mystery we set forth, A wondrous sign and seal;
Lord, give our hearts to know its worth, And all its truth to feel.

Death to the world we thus avow, Death to each sinful lust;
The risen life is our life now, The risen Christ our trust.

Baptized into the Father’s name, We’re children of our God;
Baptized into the Son, we claim The ransom of his blood;

Baptized into the Holy Ghost, In this accepted hour,
Give us to own the Pentecost, And the descending power

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