

SLIDE 1

Firstly, let me thank Steve Bartlett for giving me the opportunity to contribute to our corporate consideration of one important aspect of what it means for us to be Baptists in NSW & the ACT in the early 21st century.

My brief was to explore “the place of common affirmation of faith and practice in Baptist life, including exploration of what we mean by the terms ‘creedal’ and ‘confessional’”. To fully meet that brief would mean reviewing over 400 years of Baptist documents and condensing the findings into a 20-minute presentation.

While I have not read every document Baptists have produced, my reading has been extensive as I prepared and taught Baptist History and Theology at Morling College. I’ve selected samples of Baptist documents as the basis for this presentation and have ensured that all of them are available in print or online so you can follow through with your own reading. From my reading I have identified several trends and themes that I will illustrate from various documents. I recognise that as Baptists are an incredibly diverse group, it would be possible for other examples to be provided to illustrate alternative interpretations of very specific issues. My hope is that this presentation will at least provide a useful framework for the exploration of a complex topic.

I believe it is also important that people understand a key principle of my historical theology method, namely that theological understanding is always contextual. By this I mean that the historical context in which specific theological understandings developed influenced the shaping of those theological statements. For example, to appreciate the development of the creeds in the 4th and 5th centuries, you need to understand the context of the theological debate raging at that time around the eternal divinity of Christ, the nature of the Trinity and the relationship between the human and divine natures of Christ. The Nicene Creed (381CE) and the Definition of Chalcedon (451CE) effectively set boundaries as to who would be considered Christian and who would be considered heretics.

SLIDE 2

Before we proceed further, I need to offer some definitions of key terms so that we might be on the same page when we discuss the purpose of ‘affirmations of faith or practice’. We should note that 17th and 18th Century Baptists used terms such as ‘creed’ and ‘confession of faith,’ interchangeably, as we now do with terms such as ‘statement of faith,’ ‘statement of belief’ etc. Perhaps the more critical issue is to determine what is meant when people claim that Baptists are or are not ‘creedal’.

Timothy and Denise George, Southern Baptist Convention historians and theologians, in their book *Baptist Confessions, Covenants and Catechisms*, reject the accusation that Baptists are ‘creedal’. To come to this conclusion the Georges argue Baptists have rejected creedalism in two ways. To paraphrase the Georges:

1. Baptists have never used a theological doctrinal standard for Christianity to establish religious conformity with attendant civil sanctions enforced by the state.¹

Perhaps the best example of this form of creedalism was the establishment of Christianity as the only legal form of religion in the Roman Empire by the Emperor Theodosius in 380CE.

¹ Timothy and Denise George, eds, *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, Broadman & Holman Publishers: Nashville, Tennessee, 1999, 3.

The Nicene Creed of 381CE was used as the test of orthodoxy.² State sanctioned coercion enforced compliance. This form of state enforced Christianity developed dramatically under Justinian I (527-565CE) becoming the forerunner of 'Christendom' where all citizens of the state were also members of the state established Church and infant baptism was the sign identifying members of the Church. This connection of Church and State was a key issue that Baptists in 17th century England stood against. Baptists rejected infant baptism as understood by the established Church of England, the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, and Separatists, arguing that the New Testament taught and practiced 'baptism of believers' by immersion (from 1642 onwards). These baptised believers then voluntarily joined together as a community of faith that covenanted to live according to the teaching and example of Jesus and the early church as recorded in Scripture.³

This rejection of the authority of the State to determine the beliefs of people can be summarised in the key principle 'the Lordship of Christ'. For 17th century Baptists, Jesus is the only Lord of the Church, his body. No king, parliament or any individual has the authority to dictate what the Church must believe. Civil government's role is to ensure that the Church is safe to proclaim the gospel as revealed in Scripture.

Some Baptist principles associated with the principle of the 'Lordship of Christ' are: the nature of the local visible gathered voluntary regenerate church, the rejection of infant baptism and baptismal regeneration and affirmation of baptism of believers only by immersion, and freedom to worship as determined by the autonomous local church.

This brings us to my paraphrase of the Georges second definition of 'creed'.

2. A creed is a theological definition of Christianity that is elevated above Scripture.⁴
This highlights a second key principle of Baptists. While Baptists have shared the principle of *sola Scriptura* with other Protestants since the 16th century Reformation, the Georges argue Baptists have insisted that all human theological definitions of Christianity should be 'tried' against the Bible, since all human theological definitions are 'revisable in the light of Scripture'. Scripture remains the source from which a confession of faith is drawn. Rather than being the final word on Christian faith and practice, the purpose of a confession of faith is to provide guidance to those who voluntarily affirm the confession as the confession indicates how to read and interpret Scripture.

From their understanding of *sola Scriptura* Baptists associate several other principles such as: the priesthood of all believers, liberty of conscience and soul competency, and the determination of 'the mind of Christ' by the gathered members of the local church.

While the Georges acknowledge a confessions of faith produces unity, they reject the idea of creedalism that coercively imposes uniformity of doctrine on people by elevating humanly developed theological statements above Scripture. However, they do acknowledge that the voluntary nature of Baptist church membership supports the view that a "voluntary, conscientious adherence to an explicit doctrinal standard" that produces uniform beliefs among all who voluntarily accept the doctrinal standard is appropriate among Baptists. In the Georges view, those who do not

² Barker, John W., *Justinian and the Later Roman Empire*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin: 1966, 95-97.

³ Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways. A History*, Judson Press, Valley Forge: 2003, Chapter 2, 18-4.

⁴ George, 3.

accept the doctrinal standard should voluntarily remove themselves from the community or be removed from the membership by the community.

SLIDE 3

Initially, Baptist confessions of faith and covenants were developed by individual congregations. However, during the turbulent period 1609 to 1689⁵ Baptist churches found it prudent to form associations of churches. These associations then began to produce confessions of faith. These confessions of faith had several purposes. They sought to demonstrate continuity of Christian orthodoxy with other Protestant denominations in England, Scotland, and Wales and Europe, while indicating the Scriptural basis for their differentiation from those denominations. At the same time these confessions of faith also differentiated various Baptist groupings.⁶

A key theological difference between Baptists followed the fracture line between Calvinists and Arminians. In England Calvinist Baptist became known as Particular Baptists (Separate Baptists in the USA) as they affirmed Christ's atonement was effective for only those particular people God had foreordained to be saved, while Arminian Baptists, known as General Baptists (Regular Baptists in the USA), believed Christ's atonement was offered to all people (a general atonement) and effective for all who believed.

They also differed in their understanding of the autonomy of the local church. Particular Baptists were more likely to exhibit continuity with their Calvinist Separatist origins emphasising the independence of the local church⁷, while General Baptists were more likely to emphasise the authority of the messengers/ delegates of the gathered churches to provide instructions to any local church on matters of faith and practice.⁸ The understanding of the authority of an Associational gathering also distinguished Particular and General Baptists. By 1689 Particular Baptists in the Second London Confession declare that messengers from the Association gathering had no power or jurisdiction to censure any church or person in the association. The American Particular Baptists Philadelphia Confession of 1742 reiterated the 1689 London Confession with two additional clauses regarding laying on of hands at baptism and affirming hymn singing. The General Baptists in their 1679 Orthodox Confession declared a general assembly had "lawful power to hear and determine, as also to excommunicate" people from the local church.

SLIDE 4

While theological statements primarily addressed beliefs, individual churches produced covenants that addressed how a member of the local church should live.⁹ Frequently the covenant included a simplified version of the Association Confession of Faith, some words around the purpose of the

⁵ A period covering the English Civil War, the establishment of the Commonwealth, the restoration of the Stuart monarchy, and the beginning of the Hanoverian monarchs beginning with George I and the Act of Toleration of 1689

⁶ George, For Particular Baptist Confessions see "The London Confession (1644)", 34-49; to see the detail of the Second London Confession read the sequence "Preface to the Second London Confession (1677), 50-52; "Preface to the Second London Confession (1689), 53-55; and "The Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742), 56-93; for the General Baptist Confessions see "The Orthodox Creed (1679), 94-130.

To see the original language of these confessions, see William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, revised edition, Judson Press, Valley Forge, 1969. "The London Confession, 1644", 144-171; "The Assembly or Second London Confession, 1677 and 1688", 235-295; "The Orthodox Creed", 295-334.

⁷ "Second London Confession", Chapter XXVI, item 15 (Lumpkin, 289; George, "Philadelphia Confession, Chapter 27, item 15.

⁸ "Orthodox Creed, XXXIX", Lumpkin, 327; George, 124.

⁹ George, 14.

local church and some words around the shared values about how to live a godly life. The changes we are considering for the Baptist Association of NSW & ACT Constitution reflect to some degree these same sections: the 1919 Beliefs and 1979 Statement of Faith, the objects describing the purpose of the Association, and the values seeking to describe what we have in common that encompass Godly living.

The early covenants also had a focus on the interdependence of members expressed as mutual support and practical care. This mutuality included every member accepting the responsibility of seeking to restore to a godly life any member whose life was observed to no longer follow the instructions in the covenant or diverted from the doctrine expressed in their confession of faith. Among other things, the early covenants identified such matters as regular attendance at worship services, prayer meetings and church meetings¹⁰ as essential aspects of membership, as well as abstaining from 'all vain amusements and diversions, by which time would be foolishly spent, money wasted, our minds carnalized, and we exposed to many dangerous temptations ... engage in a special manner to sanctify the Lord's Day'¹¹ How to deal with difference of opinion about beliefs and practices were also addressed, frequently in terms like these: 'receive to and hold communion with all such by judgment of charity we conceive to be fellow-members with us in our Head, Christ Jesus, though differing from us in such controversial points as are not absolutely and essentially necessary to salvation'.¹² There are examples where certain behaviours were proscribed and resulted in dismissal from the church, for example, attending communion 'with any who do not practice believers' baptism by immersion'¹³.

SLIDE 5

Confessions of faith developed over the succeeding centuries. In the 18th century significant numbers of English General Baptists were influenced by enlightenment rationalism views about the nature of God's unity that led to rejection of the orthodox understanding of the Trinity, while most Particular English Baptists advocated the understanding of God's election to be both for salvation and damnation. Changes to the theological understanding of General and Particular Baptists in both England and the United States of America started to happen with the influence of John Wesley, George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards (1720s-1770). Perhaps of greatest importance was the influence of Jonathan Edwards' (early 1700s) theology on Andrew Fuller and William Carey (late 1700s) when Fuller developed a Calvinist position of the atonement that allowed for preaching an invitation for people to respond to the gospel. This theological position aided the formation in 1792 of what would become the Baptist Mission Society (UK). At the same time, under the influence of Daniel Taylor, remnants of General Baptists which had not succumbed to non-orthodox Trinitarian views formed the New Connexion where the emphasis on the general availability of Christ's atonement was available to all but effective only for those who believed. The theological subtleties between the Particular Baptists and General Baptists in the United Kingdom were eventually overcome in 1891 when the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland was formed and 'no confession of faith was asked for or given by either party'.¹⁴ The breaking of fellowship between

¹⁰ George, 188, item 2 (1790 UK); 206, dismissed for 3 consecutive non-attendance and no acceptable reason (1826 USA)

¹¹ George, 190, item 6 (1663 USA); 200 (1756 USA); 202, item 4 (USA);

¹² George, 194,.

¹³ George, 206, item 2 (1771/1826 USA). The Baptist Union of NSW continued the idea of covenant among NSW Baptists in *Towards Better Churches. A Guidebook for Church Workers*, 1964, 43-44.

¹⁴ A.C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, The Baptist Union Publication Dept (Kingsgate Press), London: 1947, 216.

Regular and Separate Baptist in the USA regarding the atonement was removed in 1774 and found expression in the Covenant of Meherrin Baptist Church of 1779.¹⁵

Of course, not all Baptists in the UK or the USA agreed with the minimalizing of theological statements of faith evidenced by the development of the 1891 Baptist Union of Great Britain. There were Baptists who opposed preaching and offering an invitation to respond to the gospel, and there were those who opposed missionary work since missionary work was seen as an offence to God's sovereignty and their understanding of election. There were divisions around understanding of the Sabbath, with Seventh Day Baptists forming their own association.¹⁶

By the 19th century there were two broad trends evident among Baptists. On the one hand there were Baptists who developed more detailed confessional statements that focused on doctrinal issues considered essential to the "faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). For them they were contending for the truth as revealed in Scripture. Contending for the truth included opposing error. This line of argument tended to emphasise uniformity of faith and practice for all who were part of the Association. While this approach may seem to restrict interpretation of the Scriptures to the 17th century Confessions of Faith, those contending for the faith also adopted the adage of the Congregationalist minister John Robinson who in a sermon delivered to the settlers heading to Massachusetts in 1620 declared 'the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word'.¹⁷

The other trend observed is a minimalizing of theological statements in Confessions of Faith. These Confessions of Faith tend to reduce detailed confessions of faith to a minimal evangelical understanding of what were seen as essential doctrines relating to the Trinity, person and work of Christ especially as it related to evangelism, or how to more effectively take the gospel to the world. For these people unity for the work of evangelism was a priority and they contended to 'keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3) based on the command of Jesus 'love one another as I have loved you' (John 15:12). Their catch phrase may well have been 'in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity'.¹⁸

SLIDE 6

If we ask the question, what happened when defending the truth and emphasising uniformity of faith and practice was pursued?

Within both General and Particulars there were divisions over a series of issues that the defenders of truth considered essential, and others did not.

For example, baptism and the link to church membership and subsequent participation in the Lord's Supper was divisive. You could find Particular Baptist churches that would only allow people baptised by immersion to be members and only those people were permitted to participate in the Lord's Supper (called double closed churches). But you could also find Particular Baptist churches that allowed people to be members on confession of faith rather than a specific mode of baptism and allowed all people who confessed faith in Jesus to participate in the Lord's Supper (double

¹⁵ George, 221 (1779 USA)

¹⁶ Leonard, 126-127.

¹⁷ 'John Robinson's Farewell Sermon, July 1620', in https://pilgrimhall.org/pdf/John_Robinson_Farewell_Sermon.pdf, cited 12 September 2022.

¹⁸ The sentiments of this catch phrase are clearly evident in the inaugural address to the Baptist Association of New South Wales (1868) by its President Alan Webb. See Sydney Morning Herald (NSW: 1842-1954), Wednesday 12 February 1868, page 2, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 13156289 cited 12 Sep. 2022.

open). And there were variations between these two extremes. The same could be demonstrated for General Baptist churches.

Whether 'Laying on of hands' at baptism was commanded or not was another hot topic that divided both Particular and General Baptists, and whether or not singing hymns was permitted also divided both groups of Baptists.

Particular Baptist have tended to be more theologically precise about what constitutes 'the truth' and what are the essentials of the faith. That attempt to provide theological precision has led the Particular Baptists to have sub-divisions over many issues. The more significant issues relate to Double Predestination and precisely when God chose the elect, i.e. before or after the fall. Mission and the role of slave owners as missionaries saw the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in 1845 when the USA Triennial Convention refused to allow a slave owner to be one of its missionaries in Africa. The SBC has continued to champion truth and uniformity over the succeeding period as evidenced in the development of the *Baptist Faith and Message*, the SBC's version of a Confession of Faith combined with a covenant. The first edition of the *Baptist Faith and Message* 1925 was developed in response to the threat of 'Liberal Theology' and evolutionary theory from the late 19th century. Since 1925 it has been reviewed in 1963 and 1994¹⁹ with further review recommended in 2021. It has been used to ensure employees of the SBC and theological lecturers in SBC associated seminaries teach a uniform version of Baptist faith and practice. This hasn't resulted in unity or uniformity among SBC churches as evidenced in the formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 2003 that removed itself from the SBC and joined the Baptist World Alliance (BWA). The SBC subsequently left the BWA in 2004. Controversy continues to be evident in the SBC as an ultra-conservative group sought in 2021 and 2022 to define more precisely the role of women in ministry²⁰ and approaches to racial reconciliation.²¹ At the end of the SBC convention in 2022 Robby Gallaty, a leader of the SBC, laid out his position on unity and uniformity. For him there are three essentials that he will not compromise: the Gospel, inerrancy, and the exclusivity of Christ. Apart from these three he stated that while others had liberty to do things their way he said, "I wouldn't do it that way, but Gospel unity more important than uniformity".²²

The minimalist theological trend advocating love and unity found expression in the formation of the Baptist Union of Great Britain (1891) when after about 50 years of dialogue General and Particular Baptists came together to form the one Baptist Union. Interestingly, neither the General nor Particular Baptists were required to produce a confession of faith as the basis for their Union. Fourteen years later in 1905 this trend to merge associations based on unity with diversity found global expression with the formation of the Baptist World Alliance (1905). In subsequent years both the Baptist Union of Great Britain and the Baptist World Alliance have focused on maintaining unity with diversity. The 2018 Constitution of the Baptist Union of Great Britain now has only 3 general

¹⁹ George, Chapters 9 and 10, 136-169 for introduction to the reviews of the *Baptist Faith and Message* and copy of the texts.

²⁰ Adam W. Greenway, 'First-Person: Convictional cooperation and confessional commitments', *Baptist Press*, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/convictional-cooperation-and-confessional-committments/> cited 12 Sep. 2022.

²¹ "Southern Baptists are still obsessed with Critical Race Theory" *Baptist News*, <https://baptistnews.com/article/southern-baptists-are-still-obsessed-with-critical-race-theory/#.Yx8VU3ZBxD8> cited 12 Sep. 2022.

²² <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/southern-baptist-influencers-forecast-sbcs-future-on-cp-stage-panel/> cited 12 Sep. 2022.

theological statements as the basis of the Union²³. At its centenary celebrations in 2005 the BWA issued *Principles and Guidelines for intra-Baptist Relationships*²⁴ that focus on how to maintain unity while encouraging expressing diverse theological viewpoints in a safe and loving environment. They also issued an affirmation of faith, 'Belief Statement', under eight headings with a total of 17 sub-headings.²⁵

SLIDE 7

How do we see these themes and trends play out in NSW Baptist confessions of faith/ statement of beliefs?

The slow coming together of General and Particular Baptists in the UK is mirrored in the way Baptists in NSW came together. In 1834, John Saunders, founding pastor of the Bathurst Street Church, set up that church as a Particular Baptist Church but on the open membership and open communion model of Particular Baptist Churches in the UK with which he was familiar. Daughter churches at Bathurst and Orange followed that model.

Other Baptist Churches established in Sydney did not adopt the open membership, open communion model. Rather they followed a stricter Particular Baptist church model of closed membership (only those baptised by full immersion could be members).

In 1868 three Sydney based Baptist Churches agreed to form the Association of Baptist Churches in NSW. All were Particular Baptist churches. The proposed basis of union was twofold: Scripture was the only rule of faith and practice, and membership was open to all Baptist Churches and Baptised persons. Alan Webb, the first President of the NSW Baptist Association, in his Presidential address, made it clear that Baptist Churches meant only those churches that were closed membership churches. They also made it clear that while the autonomy of the local Baptist church was to be respected, if a Church was not able to agree with the Constitution they should withdraw.

Bathurst Street Church was not initially invited to join the Association, but discussions begun late in 1868 and by 1870 the Constitution was amended removing the reference to baptised persons and Baptist Churches. This allowed Bathurst Street, Bathurst and Orange churches to join the Baptist Union of Churches on NSW, but it also meant that those who could not agree with this change removed themselves from the Union and formed the Strict and Particular Baptist Churches of NSW, echoing what had transpired in the UK when General and Particular Baptist Churches edged towards Union.

In 1870 Bathurst Street Church appointed a new pastor, Greenwood. Greenwood became an influential voice among NSW Baptists and in 1872 he produced a 'Model Trust Deed' for Baptist Churches to consider using when establishing Trusts and appointing trustees for their property. Greenwood's 8 dot point heading 'statement of faith' in 'Model Trust Deed' found its way into the trust deeds of newly established Baptist Churches in NSW, and when the Baptist Union established the Baptist Union of NSW Property Trust, these headings were carried into that legislation, and also into the 1919 Baptist Union Incorporation Act.

²³ *The Baptist Union of Great Britain*, Section 4 Declaration of Principle, https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366062/BUGB_CIO_Constitution.aspx cited 12 Sep. 2022.

²⁴ 'Principles and Guidelines for Intra-Baptist Relationships', <https://baptistworld.org/intra-baptist-covenant/> cited 12 Sep. 2022.

²⁵ 'Belief Statement', <https://baptistworld.org/beliefs/> cited 12 Sep. 2022.

By 1966 significant voices in the leadership of the BUNSW considered the minimalist “statement of faith” a “defective doctrinal basis of the Union”.²⁶ This eventually led to the 1979 revision of the Statement of Faith, which now included 13 headings with a paragraph expanding each heading.

A desire to establish a ‘Statement of Principle’ after the model used by the Baptist Union of Great Britain was fulfilled in 2000. The BUNSW adopted a ‘Statement of Principle’ that applied only to those entering Pastoral ministry for BUNSW churches. It focuses on a pastor’s relationship to the local church, especially noting the autonomy of the local church and the necessity for the pastor to work with the giftedness of the people of the local church and its constitution.²⁷ Of particular note in these Principles is the commitment pastors made to actively support the understanding of the link between immersion baptism and membership in a Baptist Church even where the local Church’s constitution promotes open membership.

The 1919 ‘Doctrinal Basis’ and 1979 ‘Statement of Faith’ were integrated with the By-Laws in 2012 to produce the first BUNSW Constitution. While the Constitution was revised in 2017, it did not amend either the 1919 ‘Doctrinal Basis’ or the 1979 ‘Statement of Faith’, though it did introduce new items in the core values section.

SLIDE 8

Issues that generated debate among Baptists in the UK and USA found echoes here in NSW. To name a few of the issues debated here in NSW: the relationship between the Association and the autonomy of the local church; ‘liberal theology’; various approaches to biblical interpretation; Biblical Inspiration; interpreting the Old Testament, especially Genesis 1-3; the ‘Social Gospel’ and justice; merging with other denominations; Ecumenism, especially relating to the World Council of Churches; Pentecostalism and Charismatics; Roman Catholicism; Women in Ministry; Reformed Baptists.

To illustrate how the overseas trends found expression here in NSW I’ll briefly look at two broad headings: Biblical Inspiration, and Ecumenism.

This issues of Biblical Inspiration, inerrancy and related matters of liberal theology had been debated previously among NSW Baptists, but in 1975 a motion passed by the Assembly instituted a committee to investigate “the effects of departure from evangelical orthodoxy on the Baptist ministry”²⁸ brought it to the fore. Following a debate at a Special Assembly, delegates voted on the nature of inspiration – verbal or dynamic. After three ballots, 304 delegates voted for verbal inspiration, 259 voted against.²⁹ The Assembly then re-affirmed the ‘Statement of Faith’ item on ‘The Scriptures’ and endorsed the principle of ‘Verbal Inspiration’. Bruce Thornton comments that “following the announcement of the ballot, the President Rev Albert Dube expressed the hope that ‘the decision will not divide the denomination but that it will continue to be a united denomination in Christ’”.³⁰ Thornton goes on to note that a subsequent resolution was also carried that allowed the faculty at Morling College to teach both Verbal and Dynamic Inspiration, with Verbal inspiration being the “official Baptist position regarding the inspiration of Scripture”.³¹

²⁶ Prior, *Some Fell on Good Ground*, Baptist Union of New South Wales, Sydney: 1966, 113.

²⁷ Thornton, *And It Brought Forth Fruit*, 378.

²⁸ Eldridge, 235.

²⁹ Eldridge, 248.

³⁰ Thornton, 371.

³¹ Thornton, 371.

Ecumenism found expression in several different ways when debated by NSW Baptists. Organic union with other denominations came to the fore when the South Australian Baptist Union proposed such a union with Congregationalist, Methodists, and Presbyterians. Local expression of such cooperation existed in NSW at the time, but organic union that would see the demise of the Baptists as a denomination was not then on the NSW Baptist's agenda. The response of the NSW Baptist Executive is telling. To agree to any such organic union would be 'a distinct breach of the constitution of the Baptist Union of Australia' as it would bring division among Australian Baptists rather than unity in doctrine, polity and work.³² Another version of ecumenism focused around the World Council of Churches. In 1950 the Baptist Union of Australia sought the views of the State Baptist Unions on the advisability of joining the World Council of Churches. NSW Baptists met twice (1950 and 1961) to discuss and vote on the idea. At both meetings the vote was 'no', the second vote being more definite than the first.³³ For those who favoured joining the WCC some moved to other denominations while others remained in fellowship.³⁴ Unity was favoured over uniformity. The final example of ecumenism relates to the association of Morling College with the Sydney College of Divinity, a debate that covered the period 1977-1989. Eldridge provides a detailed analysis of the SCD debate.³⁵ It may not unfairly be summarised as a fear of Baptist compromise and corruption through cooperation with Roman Catholics. A special assembly on 22 February 1986 resulted in 343 delegates voting to remain in the SCD, and 329 voting Morling College withdraw. By the time of the Annual Assembly in 1986 the Morling College Council had determined that for the sake of unity among NSW Baptists, Morling College would withdraw from the SCD.³⁶ Once more, NSW Baptists agreed to disagree about a substantial issue at the same time as prioritising unity.

While one outcome of these debates over doctrine and practices prioritised unity, that unity did not inhibit sub-groups forming within the BUNSW. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s saw the establishment of a Charismatic Baptists group, and later the establishment of a much more organised Reformed Baptist group. However, various individuals did leave the NSW Baptist fellowship, some finding acceptance in other denominations, others who were disillusioned simply ceased to engage with Baptist Churches.

SLIDE 9

Since 1868 the majority of NSW / ACT Baptists have pursued "unity with variety"³⁷, seeking to obey the command of Christ to love one another and by doing so to be inclusive of those who hold different views.

While there has been a trend to provide greater detail to theological statements, these statements remain what might be thought of as minimal evangelical theological statements that encompass diversity of theological opinion. There has been a focus on the autonomy of the local church and on cooperative evangelism and mission.

³² Prior, 140.

³³ Prior, 153.

³⁴ Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to 'Eternity': A History of Australian Baptists, Vol. 2 A National Church in a Global Community (1914-2005)*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought Volume 16:2, Paternoster, Milton Keynes: 2006, 586-7.

³⁵ Eldridge, 250-262.

³⁶ Eldridge, 261.

³⁷ "Baptist Association of New South Wales", Sydney Morning Herald (NSW: 1842-1954), Thursday 21 January 1869, page 5, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 13190510.

Within our fellowship of churches there have always been alternative views that have prioritised Truth, Uniformity, and producing more detailed and precise theological statements, as well as those seeking greater authority of the Association over the local church.

In our current constitution we agree that the gathered members of the Association meeting in Assembly gather to discern the mind of Christ. This is our collective privilege and responsibility.

My prayer is that this presentation will help us be prayerfully mindful of the discernible potential outcomes related to adopting an either/ or approach to unity or uniformity. Rather, I pray that we might follow the more difficult path - to maintain the unity of the Spirit, the faith once for all delivered to the saints, in a bond of peace, obeying the command of Christ that we love one another as he has loved us.

Selected Resources

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