From Woolloomooloo to ‘Eternity’: A History of Australian Baptists - Ken Manley

Review by Ross Longmead

It is difficult to sum up what is distinctive about Baptist. On the one hand they can be characterised as a non-confessional, Protestant Evangelical denomination with a congregational structure and an identity both an adult-believer's baptism. On the other, Baptists come in many varieties, from fundamentalism to liberalism, from strong evangelicals to social reformers, from megachurches to the occasional Baptist monastery. And all of these differences are found in Australian history.

This two volume work is the first substantial history of Australian Baptists and is a fine example of good historical writing. Ken Manley has chosen just the right balance between careful documentation of events and people, and a broader analysis of the meaning of these events and how they relate to the social changes going on around them. It combines scholarly rigour with readability.

The last book over 850 pages I read from beginning to end with real interest and without flagging was John Harris's One Good, 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity (1999). There are some similarities. Not only, in both cases, did the quality of the writing leave me reading with pleasure. In both books I felt at times attached to, and at times ashamed of, the people about whom I was reading — in the first book Australian missionaries and in the second book that stricken lot called Baptists.

I allowed to say that Baptists argue often, because I am a Baptist. I should also declare that I am in this book already with an appreciation for Ken Manley's passion as a historian and teacher because he was for many years Principal of Whitley College, where I teach.

This is, as Manley puts it, a private, insider's history of a denomination, but Manley doesn't try to spin it positively or attempt to avoid the feelings of those who went before.

He brings a unique broad experience to his task, as he taught history in Baptist theological colleges in three states (South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria) and has served as a Vice President of the Baptist World Alliance. This megachurches consciousness in the writing, and it is the culmination of his work as a historian.

What does that mean? Wat I am thinking, from Woolloomooloo to 'Eternity', means Woolloomooloo Baptist was the site of the first baptisms in 1832 by the first Baptist minister to come to Australia, John McKno. And 'Eternity' is the word written secretly, perhaps half a million times in chalk on pavements across the city of Sydney, by Baptist layman Arthur Stace after the Second World War — two significant events of distinctive Baptist presence in Australia.

Manley divides Australian Baptist history into the periods before and after the First World War, with a volume for each. In each volume he covers events and people more or less chronologically in one large section and covers themes in another large section.

The theme in the first volume includes the shaping of an identity as a minority denomination; the role of women, leaders and youth; and social issues. The themes in the second volume include Baptist contributions to global mission; a changing identity since the 1960s; more recent social issues; communism and radicalism; and leadership and training developments.

Manley finishes with reference to the global Baptist identity, indigenous issues and the changing shape of the mission.

The picture that comes through clearly in Manley's work is of a energetic, passionate minority, struggling for identity and, at times, respectability. I despair as I read how often their independence of mind is tested, kept arguments and refusal to co-operate.

Baptists reject Australia's Federation, in that being Baptist is much more a state-based identity than a national one. On almost any issue — from the ordination of women to admitting members who have been baptised as infants elsewhere — Baptists have differed from one another and, on occasion, to the other.

I was surprised to find that in my city Melbourne, as early as 1850 there was already a Baptist church in Collins St and a brevity church in nearby Albert St. This pattern repeats itself, accounting for a certain divide and certainty in doctrinal matters that seems to overshadow the shifting of the Baptist News that is so close to the heart of Baptist and other Evangelicals.

I was surprised to discover that while Baptist churches have never been regarded as mainstream or 'establishment', many successful Baptist leaders, more often than not lay members, played significant roles in building Australia.

The quest for an identity at three levels, as Australians, Australian Christians and Australian Baptists seems to have been a lively one. Manley suggests that Baptists are less sectarian and would have more readily adopted Charles Wesley's vision in which 'names and sects and parties fall' and '...O Christ, at all in all...'. I agree that many Baptists already more than Evangelicals, but Baptists and others go further in their ecumenism and seek to identity simply as 'Christian'.

Baptists are noted for their passion for mission. As Manley shows, in the past it has largely meant evangelism but now is likely include all dimensions of God's glorious reign. The more recent changes he charts so carefully are crucial, it seems to me, when it comes to the way Baptists relate in mission to those around them, both in Australia and globally. Will Baptists begin the old tradition of observing communities or will they find new and different ways of being a believer's church on a largely post-Christian society? This not only makes for the reading but I am sure will become a standard text for understanding Australian Baptists and their approach to mission.