WHAT IS THE “BAPT” IN BAPTCARE?

GLIMPSING BACK TO BAPTIST IDENTITY AND PRINCIPLES**[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Abstract**

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Baptcare is the social service agency of the Baptist Union of Victoria. It positions itself as a faith-based organisation with a clear Christian and Baptist identity. Revisiting Baptist principles can help resource and sustain this organisational agenda. Baptist churches are diverse but share common values and principles. Firstly, they share a spirituality grounded in the authority of Scripture, which believers are encouraged to read and apply, and the example of Jesus and his subversive life and teaching. Secondly, they see church as a group of committed disciples with a set of radical practices including baptism of believers, the Lord’s Supper, the priesthood and ministry of all believers, and congregational governance. Baptist churches associate with other churches and agencies, but the locus of decision-making is decentralised with the local congregation. Thirdly, Baptist churches have a proud tradition of activism holistically committed to the mission of both evangelism and social justice, especially to the margins. The famous Baptist missionary, William Carey, and Australia’s second Baptist pastor, John Saunders, embody an activist faith that communicated and demonstrated, in word and deed, the transformative value of Christianity for individuals and society. Finally, Baptists espouse an approach to politics that affirms religious liberty both for themselves and ideally for people of all backgrounds or faiths, and the separation of church and state, although this may become contentious when churches use state aid. Baptist churches as well as agencies such as Baptcare can still gain inspiration from these basic principles of Baptist identity, beginning foundationally with Scripture and Jesus.

# BAPTIST CHURCHES IN AUSTRALIA

Baptist churches in Australia have existed since 1831 when they held their first service and in 1836 the first church building was finished, part of a global movement that started over 400 years ago with the first Baptist church in Amsterdam in 1609. Baptist churches are Protestant in the Radical or Free Church tradition. At the core, Baptist identity and principles are spirituality grounded in Scripture and Jesus; churches of committed disciples with radical practices; activism committed to holistic mission; and a political stance of religious liberty and separation of church and state. This article explores these principles and begins to discuss their relevance to Baptcare as the social service agency of the Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV).

Across Australia just over 352,000 people (1.64% of the population) identify as Baptist. 63% of that number (or 1% of the population) attend church monthly or more regularly. There are 63,775 formal members of 960 Australian Baptist churches. Numerically, Baptists are the third largest denomination (after Catholics and Anglicans).[[2]](#footnote-2) Globally, there are 40 million baptised members and a community of more than 100 million in 175,000 churches.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Baptist Church movement started as a persecuted minority. Protestant Church Reformers such as Luther, Calvin and Zwingli confronted the Catholic Church and called for people to have access to the Bible and to God for themselves. The Catholic Church had its own “Counter-Reformation”. But others were saying neither Protestants nor Catholics were going far enough. “Radical Reformers” claimed the Church was too tied up with the state. They advocated people needed freedom to choose their own religion. Rather than baptising children and presuming they would grow up as Christian believers, Anabaptists (or literally “re-baptisers”) baptised people who decided voluntarily to believe and follow Jesus. Anabaptists were one of the early influential groups for Baptists. State and church leaders – Catholic or Protestant – did not like the radical or nonconformist approach or Anabaptists or Baptists. They persecuted early Baptists and anyone who adopted broadly “Anabaptist” practices. One form of twisted and ironic persecution they practised was drowning Anabaptists as punishment for not conforming politically and religiously!

Baptists in Australia are far removed from the persecution of Baptist pioneers or the oppression that Baptists receive in some parts of the world today. They are also far removed from the United States where the Baptist church is the largest Protestant denomination with 16% of Americans. In secular or post-secular Australia, Baptists are more likely to be the recipients of indifference or apathy than outright persecution. Partly because of Baptist churches’ youth and children’s programs, but mainly because of migration growth, Australian Baptist churches are one of only three denominations that are growing overall in Australia.[[4]](#footnote-4) But this growth is in the context of overall decline in the popularity of church and organised religion, and is not keeping up with population growth. Baptist churches are asking how can they better connect with their communities.

Previously, people often had strong loyalty to a particular denomination. Today we live in not just a post-Christian society but also post-denominational. People are more likely to connect with a particular church because of relationships, or the services or worship style, rather than because it is Baptist or any other denomination. The 216 Baptist churches in Victoria come in all shapes and sizes (as do the 30,000 people who participate in them). Some churches have less than 10 people attending; others have thousands. Many adopt a contemporary approach to worship and meet in modern factory-like buildings; others offer a more traditional liturgy. Some maintain “Baptist” in their name alongside their location, like “Kew Baptist Church”; others adopt a more generic title, such as “Katalyst” or “Heartland”. Most seek to be local Australian expressions of church, but some draw inspiration from UK church models, others from North America. All value the Bible, but some apply it fundamentally; others use modern critical methods of interpretation. All say they value mission as participating broadly in the healing purposes of God, but some most highly value evangelism that focuses on verbally communicating the Christian message and bringing people to faith; others are convinced the mission of the church has to include holistic service and advocacy for justice. In the midst of all this variety, those who are involved in Baptist churches may ask, “what does it mean to be Baptist?”

# BAPTIST IDENTITY OF BAPTIST AGENCIES

As well as Baptist local churches, there are Baptist agencies that were started by and continue to be connected with Baptist churches. There are Baptist mission and global aid organisations, insurance and financial services, schools and camps, theological colleges, and social service agencies such as Baptcare. Each agency was started as churches recognised that there are things that could better be done together, and by specialist agencies. Each agency has a life of its own – with its own mission, board, staff and budgets. Many of the clients or students have no other connection with the Baptist church. Thus the question emerges for each agency, what does it mean to be Baptist?

What does it mean for Baptcare to be a “Baptist” agency? Baptist identity is not just a question of relationship and accountability, but one of values. Where does the extensive work of Baptcare fit or find resource and inspiration in Baptist tradition? How do Baptist distinctives find expression in the work and services of Baptcare as an agency? Baptcare, as their tagline proudly proclaims, is on about “Bringing *Care* to Life”, but what does the “Bapt” mean?

This article explores the identity and distinctives of what it is to be Baptist, and especially the implications for the work of a social service agency such as Baptcare and its relationship with the churches. The article does not presume these beliefs are held or need to be held by all in Baptcare, nor by all in Baptist churches. Moreover, they are not completely unique to Baptist churches. There is more that different branches of the church have in common, than they have that is different. But the following four themes are representative and distinctive of the ethos of Baptist churches out of which Baptcare was born and with which it identifies.

# 1. SPIRITUALITY: OUR INSPIRATION IS JESUS AND OUR AUTHORITY IS THE BIBLE

Firstly, Baptist churches and faith begin with a spirituality grounded in the Lordship of Jesus and the authority of Scripture. Baptist churches have a biblical and Jesus-shaped spirituality. They would readily say, “Our inspiration is Jesus and our authority is the Bible”.

## Lordship of Christ

“Jesus is Lord” is probably the earliest confession of faith in the New Testament (Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11). When Baptist Christians and churches follow Jesus and invite Jesus to be Lord, they are inviting him to be the primary source of authority and sovereignty (distinct from the sovereignty of the state). Jesus becomes the ultimate example for the way they live and his teachings are the ultimate guide. Followers of Jesus seek to live like Jesus, or even in a mystical sense to let Jesus live his life through them and thus function as “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27). Jesus said to his followers, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (John 20:21), and the church lives in that “sentness”, existing for the sake of others.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Michael Frost, Vice-Principal of Morling College – the Baptist Theological College of NSW, writes about letting Jesus’ example and teaching subvert our lives and churches. In *Jesus the Fool* he shows how Jesus reframes our views of sin, guilt and relating to people and to God. Frost’s intent is not to disrespect Jesus, but to represent him in ways that are faithful to the gospel accounts, if read in their cultural background and without “churchy” expectations. He also suggests some other images of understanding Jesus, such as is like a medieval court jester who provocatively challenges the *status quo*. When Jesus lived in Palestine, people hoped for a revolutionary messiah, but Jesus came quietly on the margins and shattered people’s expectations. He refused to take up arms and eagerly attended parties with people the religious elite looked down upon. Frost summarises his message from the Gospel of Luke as good news of:

* Forgiveness as gift rather than reward
* Community that values relationships over property
* Generosity in a world that is stingy
* Hospitality in a world of hostility.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The calling of Christians, as Frost and his co-writer Alan Hirsch argue, is to become a “conspiracy of little Jesuses” transforming their communities and embracing selflessness and generosity in similar ways to Jesus.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The Lordship of Jesus is not just an antiquated doctrinal belief about who Jesus was or is, but recognition that Jesus is relevant today. Frost and Hirsch continue their challenge that this is the ultimate measurement for any church, Baptist or otherwise:

The only way we can truly authenticate ourselves as an expression of Christianity is to measure ourselves against the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, our Lord. And it is to him that we must now return if we are going to faithfully negotiate the profound challenges of the twenty-first century. But surely this is what the church tries to do in every age and context? Surely all expressions of Christianity seek to call Jesus Lord and have a special place reserved for him in their life and theology. We would argue that while confessionally this might be true, the church throughout history struggles to conform its life to the radical life and teachings of Jesus.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Confessing “Jesus as Lord” is not unique to Baptist Christians as it is a general confession of Christian faith, but Baptists distinctively seek to give Jesus and his lordship priority and arguably espouse the lordship of Christ as a distinctive of their faith more than some other traditions of the church. In Baptist churches and in Baptcare there is a lot still to learn about Jesus and about how he informs our work and mission. Today, Baptist churches and Baptcare share in common the aspiration that “our inspiration is Jesus”. Even for many who do not identify as a Christian, or who might hesitate to identify with the Lordship of Christ, Jesus is still a remarkable example of character and service.

## Authority of Scripture

The other foundation of Baptist church spirituality is the authority of Scripture. In the seventeenth-century, Protestant reformers asserted people could understand truth and God by reading the Bible for themselves, rather than relying on church leaders, tradition or creeds. Fortunately, English Bible translations and printing presses made it available in language everyday people could access and understand. Baptists asserted the right and responsibility of everyone to read and understand the Bible themselves.

There have, of course, been many disagreements over how the Bible is to be understood and applied. All Baptists agree that Scripture has authority for what to believe and how to live, and most believe it has ultimate authority above reason, experience and tradition. But Baptists have differed on how to interpret the ancient words of the Bible and apply them to contemporary contexts. For example, Baptists have varying beliefs about creation and evolution, or homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Like other Protestant churches, there is theological diversity among Baptists. Some Baptists read and apply the Bible in a “literal sense”, while others seek to give greater attention to its historical and literary context. Different groups may say others interpret it incorrectly, narrowly or carelessly; but the disagreement is over how to interpret and apply the Bible that all Baptists value as God’s Word, rather than whether or not to treat it as a source of trusted authority.

Two main ways Baptists use the Bible are in public worship and private devotions. In common with other Protestant and evangelical churches, Baptist preachers often provide a biblical sermon as a central part of worship services. Some follow a traditional sermon format; others encourage a greater degree of interaction as part of learning and teaching. Questions and answer time, or discussion during or after a sermon is becoming more common. Pastors are ordained partly in recognition that they are reliable teachers and leaders. Yet a “multi-voiced church” seeks to benefit and learn from the insights about the Bible from people of all ages, all cultures and all stages of faith or none.[[9]](#footnote-9) These are more recent manifestations of the older Baptist emphasis on democratic participation.

Baptists also encourage Bible engagement with personal devotionals. People set aside time each day to read a section of the Bible and pray, and be open to listening to what God is saying. Just as some churches are moving towards more interactive teaching, some are also broadening their “spiritual practices” beyond just Bible reading to also explore contemplative prayer, fasting, “lectio divina” or slow reading of Scripture, retreats and spiritual companionship (practices that have a longer tradition in the Catholic and Anglican traditions).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Another way Baptists are reading the Bible afresh is seeing it as a narrative that the church continues to live. If the history of the Hebrew people is like one Act in a play, Jesus another Act, and the early church another, now it is up to the contemporary church to “improvise” and continue the story. By reading the Bible for insights into how God’s people have lived in the past, and by living with Jesus as Lord in the present – following his example, teaching and guidance – the church continues the story of Jesus and his church.[[11]](#footnote-11) This living out of the story and inspiration of Jesus and the Bible is at the heart of Baptist spirituality.

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# 2. CHURCH: COMMITTED DISCIPLES WITH RADICAL PRACTICES

Baptist churches have a conviction that they are a fellowship of believers, or a company of committed disciples. As Nigel Wright writes, Christian faith does not come from natural birth but new birth, and Christian discipleship is to be chosen, at a cost not from convenience.[[12]](#footnote-12) In the era of “Christendom”, everyone was assumed to be Christian. It is an arguably post-Christendom idea that faith and church participation is voluntary. Baptist founder John Smyth proudly stated a Baptist church is “a true church of true believers”. This was not to say there were not other true churches, but an authentic church is a group of committed disciples, not just people born into the church. Baptists celebrate the truth of Jesus’ words, “For where two or three gather together as my followers [literally “in my name], I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). Church is not about structures, liturgy, sacraments or buildings, but about the gathered people of God and their radical practices.

## Believer’s baptism

The way to fully join a Baptist church is usually through baptism and becoming a church member. Baptist churches practice “believer’s baptism”, usually full immersion of a person in water to demonstrate their desire to identify with and follow Jesus. Baptism is an image of cleansing and initiation. It also shows identification with Jesus, following Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist, and as symbolically identifying with Jesus’ death by going down into the water and rising to new life (Romans 6:3-4). It is a pledge of commitment to Christ and the church. It is a symbol of conscientious objection to the prevailing powers and realignment with the ways and values of the Kingdom of God. Instead of baptising infants of believing parents as a sign of including children in church (infant baptism), Baptist churches invite people to make a voluntary faith decision and to demonstrate that publically with baptism (believer’s baptism). Although many other churches still practice infant baptism, more are adopting the practice of adult or believer’s baptism. The ecumenical document *Baptist, Eucharist and Ministry* agrees that believer’s baptism should be the normal practice.[[13]](#footnote-13)

## Lord’s Supper

Baptists teach and practice two “ordinances”, drawn from the two “commands” of Jesus: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. As ordinances they are expressions of communal faith, but not in themselves uniquely sacraments or means of receiving grace. The Catholic Church has seven sacraments but Baptists celebrate that sacredness is not limited to church or religious ceremonies, and that there is sacredness in everyday life. People can experience something of God’s Spirit everywhere and anywhere. But as well as baptism as the once-off mark of life-long commitment to Christ, Baptists practice the Lord’s Supper or communion as a memorial and symbolic meal, to remember Jesus and what he has done for people in his death.

The Lord’s Supper commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples, the night before his crucifixion (Matthew 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:17–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–25). Jesus gave the disciples bread and wine, saying “This is my body” and “this is my blood”, and invited them to take the bread and wine to remember him. Baptists, like all churches, see the Lord’s Supper as a reminder of what Jesus did in his death, and an opportunity to renew communion with Christ and one another. Other denominational traditions and some Baptists teach that Jesus is present in the Eucharist in some way. This has been a matter of complex debate across the centuries about the nature of the presence of Christ, ecumenically and for Baptists. But Baptists generally are among the groups that tend to emphasise the Lord’s Supper as a symbolic occasion to remember Jesus.

The other element of Christian community that the Lord’s Supper reminds us of is Jesus’ eating patterns. Many of his encounters with people on the margins were in the midst of hospitality and meals. He was labelled a glutton and drunkard, eating often with people others looked down on (Luke 7:34). When he asked his disciples to remember him by eating and drinking it is helpful to remember not just the Last Supper, but all meals Jesus ate with all sorts of people. Michael Frost urges celebrating the presence of Jesus and his grace in the ordinary things of life, especially in healthy and wholesome meals in the company of friends and strangers.[[14]](#footnote-14) That may be the best way to celebrate the Lord’s Supper and to honour Jesus, for our churches and for agencies like Baptcare – not just to remember and honour the death he died but the life he lived, and to spend time with those he died for. The Lord’s Supper is a central symbol of hospitality, which is to be lived in the world and not just within religious ritual.

## Priesthood of all believers

In contrast to some traditions that elevate a select group of priests as mediators between God and people, Baptist churches teach that every believer has direct access to God in prayer and worship. This is referred to as “soul freedom”, “personal faith”, “experiential religion”, “the competency of the soul before God” or “the priesthood of all believers”. Each person is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), and so has unique dignity and worth. Everyone is invited to respond to the claims of Christ for themself, just as Jesus said to his disciples “But who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15).[[15]](#footnote-15) Each person is able to relate to God for themselves. Peter addressed the people of God with this image in one of his biblical letters and underlined that the ideal is that as priests all believers witness to what God is doing in their lives: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9) This should not be interpreted to mean an excessive individualism, and Baptists have sometimes distorted this idea by stressing the role of the individual over the nature of community. Part of the privilege of Baptist faith is everyone being invited to access God for themselves, but this is in the context of a community of faith.

## Ministry of the whole people of God and leadership by some

It is a Baptist distinctive, furthermore, that every believer has gifts to contribute to the church. Some people are recognised as called and set apart as church leaders – and ordained or commissioned as pastors, or nominated as deacons or leaders to serve alongside pastors. But when it comes to identifying who does the ministry, the ideal is that everyone makes a unique contribution. The role of leaders is to equip the whole people of God for their ministry – in the church and in the world (Ephesians 4:11-12).

## Church membership

Becoming a church member usually follows baptism. Most members would have been baptised as believers by immersion. As discussed above, this represents their individual decision to follow Jesus. But Baptist faith is not just about personal individual choice because then the believing community recognises and affirms the faith of the believer and agrees to admit the applicant to membership. Some churches require baptism by immersion as a condition for membership (“closed membership” churches). Other churches do not require baptism (“open membership”). Others accept an alternate form that demonstrates faith commitment, such as infant baptism and confirmation (“modified open membership”). Many Baptist churches emphasise membership as a “covenant” relationship – agreeing to belong and being accountable to one another ethically and theologically.

## Congregational governance

Because church is a company of committed disciples and all have access to God, Baptist churches entrust decision-making to the congregational church meeting of members. This governance system is referred to as “congregational governance”. Pastors have a leadership role, along with volunteer leaders, but they are accountable to the members. Denominational leaders, similarly, have a leadership and resourcing role, but local churches discerns their own direction rather than following the dictates of an outside body. The ideal is that the members meet not to assert their own agendas, but to seek God’s will. It is a “theocratic” rather than “democratic” approach, discerning the mind of Christ for what Christ wants to do through the church, but it was historically shaped in contrast to more hierarchical models of church governance.

These distinctives show the value that Baptist churches place on individuals but in community. The ethos celebrates local expression, diversity and valuing each person. These are helpful values for churches as voluntary organisations. But even in large business or non-profit organisations, it is a healthy dynamic if people at all levels are involved in collaborative vision development and decision-making.

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## Association

A final practice of Baptist churches is association. Congregational governance does not mean that Baptist churches are independent, but rather interdependent, albeit autonomous and self-governing. Out of voluntary mutual accountability, churches relate together in the tribe of broader churches we call the Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV). Association – as BUV expresses it “our mission is advanced better together” – is a long held distinctive for Baptist churches around the world. Baptist churches realise they are part of the broader body of Christ or universal church. They relate to one another to share resources and vision, identify and train leaders, mediate conflict and cooperate for mission. Victorian pastors, church delegates and agencies gather twice a year in “BUV Assembly” meetings for discernment, decision-making and training. There is also shared resourcing through Australian Baptist Ministries and Baptist World Alliance.

Baptist churches also relate to other denominations, recognising that all churches are part of the one true church, and that Baptist churches are merely one branch. Baptist churches are not isolationist, although inter-church cooperation happens more often at the local level. BUV is not a formal member of the Victorian Council of Churches although several individuals serve on different committees, and BUV and other Australian State Baptist Unions fully participate in the Baptist World Alliance which relates to the World Council of Churches. Association also occurs as Baptist churches work with agencies including Baptcare. Local Baptist churches are empowered to individually serve their neighbourhoods, but may also partner with other groups with whom they have potential to cooperate in the mission of God.

# 3. ACTIVISM: HOLISTIC MISSION OF EVANGELISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE, ESPECIALLY TO THE MARGINS

Apart from distinctive approaches to how churches function, a prior Baptist commitment is to fulfil the mission of God in their neighbourhoods and the world. Baptists are proud to be “evangelical” in their conviction that Jesus Christ is unique, and that the Bible is the word of God and source of authority, and that these gifts of grace are worth sharing. But the mission that Baptists seek to exercise is holistic and expressed in both evangelism (explaining Christianity in words) and social justice (demonstrating Christianity with deeds).

# Holistic Baptist leaders

William Carey (1761-1834) is known as the father of the modern missionary movement. Carey challenged Baptists to organise themselves to fulfil Jesus’ commissioning words of Matthew 28:18-20 of discipleship and teaching, not just in their own country but to every nation. In 1793 the Baptist Missionary Society formed and sent Carey to India. His mission work broadly included evangelism and advocacy for justice, education and translation of the Bible and other texts. Some postcolonial scholars have criticised Carey as part of the colonial machine.[[16]](#footnote-16) Yet Carey’s positive influence is appreciated by others, including Hindu scholar Saugata Bhaduri who celebrates Carey’s influence on Bengali language, literature and education.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Australian Baptist church history also has a proud tradition of activist faith. Sydney’s second Baptist pastor, Rev John Saunders, gave attention to pressing social issues in the early colony. He opposed transportation, welcomed immigrants and campaigned for temperance. Heather Vose comments: “In his eyes, such involvement in social concerns naturally expressed his commitment to the Gospel, testifying to its power to change even the most degraded lives.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Saunders was an early voice advocating for indigenous people. During the trial of stockmen who killed Aboriginal people in the Myall Creek massacre, Saunders preached that Aboriginal people were fully human and deserved full recognition of human rights. He acknowledged the British wrongs in invading the land and devastating Aborigine peoples, and called the young colony to repent and make restitution. Historian Henry Reynolds positively evaluates Saunders sermon in 1838 as “one of the most eloquent presentations of humanitarian doctrine” from the period.[[19]](#footnote-19)

# Beyond the walls

Evangelist John Ridley preached about eternity at Burton Street Baptist Church: “I wish I could shout ‘Eternity’ through the streets of Sydney!” The sermon touched the heart of Arthur Stace (1884-1967), a stretcher-bearer in World War I who became an alcoholic and criminal until his conversion. He responded to Ridley’s preaching by chalking the word “Eternity” in Stace’s unique copperplate script about 600,000 times on Sydney’s streets. His message touched many people and he became infamous with his “Baptist graffiti”. At the dawn of the year 2000, “Eternity” was lit up on the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Morling College Principal Ross Clifford suggests this is a powerful illustrative story of Australian Baptists:

They have always been committed to mission beyond the four walls of the church. They have been committed to a ministry of transformation. No doubt there have been different emphases and theological groups across the ages, but Baptists have sought to make a Godly impact for the gospel. They are a people-focused denomination who have had an influence far beyond their numbers.[[20]](#footnote-20)

## On the margins

Baptists, furthermore, have a tradition of concern for those who are most marginalised. Ross Langmead, Whitley College Professor of Mission Studies for twenty years 1993-2013, reflected on Jesus’ concern for the marginalised and the significance of that for refugees. Jesus consistently broke boundaries and reversed the social order in affirming the human dignity of people on the margins of his society – women, children, sick, poor, ritually impure, moral failures and cultural outsiders. Langmead observes Jesus thus follows a rich Hebrew tradition of reflecting a God who is just and merciful “a refuge for the oppressed, a place of safety in times of trouble” (Psalm 9:9). Jesus speaks out of a prophetic tradition that summons God’s people to worship through justice seeking:

Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives. Then my favour will shine on you like the morning sun. (Isaiah 58:6-8; cf. Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus encouraged his followers to look out for those on the margins by telling the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). The famous parable underlines the importance of loving with compassionate service the stranger left struggling on the side of the road, or left and bypassed in a refugee camp or drowning in a leaky boat.[[21]](#footnote-21)

# 4. POLITICS: RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

## Religious liberty

Baptists started when English monarchs ruled the church alongside bishops and insisted everyone worship in the Church of England. Baptists formed part of the Separatist and Non-conformist movement who advocated for religious liberty for themselves and others. They wanted to see an end to the State monopoly on religion. This brought them into sharp conflict with the state and established church.

King James I, famous for the Bible version with his name, declared in 1604 that he would not tolerate dissent. John Smyth (1570-1612) left England in 1606, and started the first Baptist church in Amsterdam in 1609. He argued, “The magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men [sic.] to this or that form of religion, or doctrine.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Baptists have defended this position of religious liberty for themselves and for everyone throughout their history.

The Baptist World Alliance (BWA) when it started in 1905 embraced religious liberty as one main goal. BWA appoints staff and study commissions to explore and advocate for freedom and religious liberty globally.[[23]](#footnote-23) BWA protects minority rights, mediates in ethnic conflict and opposes racism. Although Baptists have a strong conviction about mission and encouraging people to embrace what is good news about Christianity, they also maintain the right of everyone to their own faith and freedom of worship, including freedom not to worship.

The principle of religious liberty or freedom is reflected in the BUV value of: “Respect – everyone deserves dignity, we value diversity and respect the views of others”. It is inappropriate in multi-faith Australian society to espouse any religious compulsion or discrimination, but it is also counter to Baptist tradition. Taking a stand for social inclusion and diversity is consistent with Baptist identity.

## Separation of church and state

A second related principle of Baptist politics is a strong advocacy for separation of church and state, an idea adopted especially in America.[[24]](#footnote-24) Roger Williams, founder of America’s first Baptist church, proposed the term “the separation of church and state”, arguing government should deal with matters between people, but not between people and God.**[[25]](#footnote-25)** He critiqued the state-supported churches of Massachusetts punishing people for not accepting Puritan dogma. The civil and religious authorities banished him, so he moved to Rhode Island and championed separation of church and state there. Separating church and state does not mean Baptists should not be involved in politics. The principle is about the State not favouring one church, nor using a church for political ends, nor the church using the State for its purposes. [[26]](#footnote-26)

Baptists have had a long tradition of being tentative about state involvement and support in church programs. Rev John Saunders accepted state aid for land and a church building, but Baptist churches back in England were shocked to hear of this departure from Baptist principles.[[27]](#footnote-27) In 1836, the Bourke Church Act offered a minister’s stipend to New South Wales churches, but most Baptists rejected it. Some Baptists believed it is wrong to accept any assistance or tax exemptions from government. The issue came to the forefront of debate for Australian Baptists in the 1950s and 1960s as they considered Government support for independent schools, Aboriginal missions and support for chaplaincy and social services; which was timely for Whitley College which benefited from federal and state government grants to building its new buildings by 1965, and for Baptist social agencies as their scope of programs and budget has grown beyond the ability of churches to support. The issue has always been whether aid is accompanied by control, and whether aid enables the agency to fulfil a social service that is consistent with Christian values or not and/or whether it diverts the church from its priorities. It becomes an issue at other times when government money is used for church sponsored activities, especially when the church is concerned that finance will give the State leverage in controlling the activities. For educational and welfare programs, however, Baptist agencies are heavily dependent on government funding.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Baptist historian Ken Manley, formerly Principal of Whitley College, comments that state subsidies can distance spiritual goals, yet it can also introduce professionalism and enable social action on a scale impossible without state support:

It is clearly arguable that the wide ministry of contemporary Baptists serving so many people, a ministry made possible only by a form of partnership with the state, truly does express a broad vision of the kingdom of God at work in our society. The ministry of dedicated leaders who serve with compassion, skill and care in our schools and social agencies is to be honoured. But in a changing political and social context caution is needed.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Baptcare demonstrates the extent of what can be achieved in partnership with state aid, but is also aware of dilemmas with inflexibility and compliance costs.

## Conclusion

Baptcare has a Christian and Baptist identity as the social service agency of BUV. It employs, benefits from and serves people of all religious backgrounds and none, yet seeks to steward its investment in Christian faith and resources. Baptcare wants to deepen the organisation’s religious basis and position itself proudly as a faith-centred organisation.[[30]](#footnote-30) Understanding and practicing Baptist principles can help resource and sustain this journey. This article explored the core of Baptist identity in these four elements:

* Spirituality grounded in the authority of Scripture and the Lordship of Jesus
* Churches of committed disciples with radical practices
* Activism with holistic mission of evangelism and social justice, especially to the margins
* Politics that affirm religious liberty and the separation of church and state.

For all the diversity of Baptist churches, we can glimpse back to these principles of Baptist identity that are core inspiration for Baptists.

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**Mission Catalyst – Researcher, Baptist Union of Victoria**

1. Baptcare commissioned this article as a resource for its staff and strategic direction. It is the first of a two part series, to be followed by “‘Lord Let Me See’: Glimpsing back to Baptist Approaches to Social Justice”. I appreciate the comments of Roxanne Addley, Mark Brett, Ken Manley and Anne Wilkinson-Hayes on earlier drafts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2011 Australian Census; 2009 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes; Philip Hughes and Darren Cronshaw, *Baptists in Australia: A Church with a Heritage and a Future* (Melbourne: Christian Research Association, 2013), 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Baptist World Alliance, Statistics, Dec 31, 2013, <https://www.bwanet.org/about-us2/statistics> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hughes and Cronshaw, *Baptists in Australia*, 70-83 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For an expansion of this theme by two BUV staff, see Kim Hammond and Darren Cronshaw, *Sentness: Six Postures of Missional Christians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Michael Frost, *Jesus the Fool: The Mission of the Unconventional Christ* (Melbourne: Urban Neighbours of Hope, 2007); reviewed by Darren Cronshaw in *Sight Magazine*(3 Feb 2014), <http://www.sightmagazine.com.au/stories/Books/frost2.2.14.php>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009), 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Frost and Hirsch, *ReJesus*, 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Beth Barnett and Keith Dyer, *Party on Together: Multi-Age Worship Resources & Bible Studies* (Melbourne: Scripture Union, 2010); Stuart and Sian Murray, *Multi-Voiced Church* (Milton-Keyned: Paternoster, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Inspired by e.g., Richard Foster, Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith (London: HarperCollins, 1999) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. E.g., James William Jr McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990); N T Wright, “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative? (Laing Lecture 1989 and Griffith Thomas Lecture 1989),” *Vox Evangelica* 21(1991), 7-32 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nigel Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2002), 97 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1982) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Michael Frost, Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 159 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Walter B Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), 23-25 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. R. S. Sugirtharajah, “A Postcolonial Exploration of Collusion and Construction in Biblical Interpretation.” *The Postcolonial Bible*. Edited by R S Sugirtharajah (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 91-116. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Saugata Bhaduri, “Polycoloniality: Rethinking Postcolonialism,” *Storyweaving: Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Theology*. Whitley College, Melbourne, Postcolonial Theology Network - International Conference (23-25 January, 2012), 1-9; Saugata Bhaduri, “Colonial Contact, Translation, and the Case of Modern Bengali.” *Le Texte étranger (3). Travaux 2008-2011*. Claire Joubert. Vincennes à Saint-Denis, Université Paris 8. Travaux et documents, No. 55 (2012),119-128; discussed in Darren Cronshaw, “A Commision ‘Great’ for Whom? Postcolonial Contrapuntal Readings of Matthew 28:18-20 and the Irony of William Carey’, *Transformation* (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Heather Vose, “Australian Baptists in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Australian Baptists Past and Present*, ed. Michael Petras (Lawson: Baptist Historical Society of New South Wales, 1988), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ken R Manley, From Woolloomooloo to ‘Eternity’: A History of Australian Baptists (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 28-31; Ken Manley and Barbara J Coe, ‘The Grace of Goodness’: John Saunders – Baptist Pastor and Activist, Sydney 1834-1848. A Documentary Biography (Macquarie Park, NSW: Greenwood Press, in association with the Baptist Historical Society of NSW, 2014); Henry Reynolds, This Whispering in Our Hearts (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Manley, From Woolloomooloo to ‘Eternity’, 5-6; Hughes and Cronshaw, Baptists in Australia, 5, 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ross Langmead, “Refugees as Guests and Hosts: Towards a Theology of Mission among Refugees and Asylum Seekers,” *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research* 43: 1 (2014), 29-47 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. William L Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1969), 140; William H Brackney, *A Capsule History of Baptist Principles* (Atlanta, Georgia: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2009), 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Brackney, A Capsule History of Baptist Principles, 86-89 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ken Manley, “Australian Baptists and the State: Partner or Peril?,” in *Interfaces, Baptists and Others: International Baptist Studies*, ed. David Bebbington and Martin Sutherland (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013), 201-215 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. H Leon McBeth, “God Gives Soul Competency and Priesthood to All Believers,” in *Defining Baptist Convictions: Guidelines for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Charles W Deweese (Franklin, TN: Providence House, 1996), 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Gary E Parker, *Principles Worth Protecting* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), 54-55 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to ‘Eternity’*, 19; Manley, “Australian Baptists and the State,” 203-210; Hughes and Cronshaw, *Baptists in Australia*, 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hughes and Cronshaw, *Baptists in Australia*, 41; Manley, “Australian Baptists and the State,” 210-215 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Manley, “Australian Baptists and the State,” 215 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Olivia Maclean, A Methodological Approach to Growing a Dynamic and Gracious Faith-Based Agency, Baptcare Board Strategic Planning Day Discussion Paper, November 16th, 2013; R J Sider and H R Unruh, “Typology of Religious Characteristics of Social Service and Educational Organisations and Programs,” *Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 33(2009), 109-134 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)