

# **A Baptist in Search of Himself**

*By Allan Demond*

*This article is based on a talk given to Baptist leaders at the Installation Service for Rev. Dr. Bill Brown as the Chairman of the National Council of Australian Baptist Ministries, 19 May 2015.*

I am a Baptist! I celebrate my rich heritage and our wonderful tradition. But I have a question. It is a borrowed question and you will recognise it straight away.

I am a Baptist, indeed, 'But who do you say that I am'?

Jesus asked this question (Matt 16:17) to generate clarity and commitment in the minds of his disciples. I use it for the same reason. I believe it is time for Australian Baptists to take an identity journey. Or better, to become even more intentional in the journey we have begun.

It is time to tell each other who we aspire to be and what future we hope to celebrate together. It may take half a decade of thought, dialogue, writing and wrestling as we travel. It will not be simple. There may be pain. But I believe it is time. And I believe we are ready.

## ***Who cares?***

Some might think I am asking the wrong question.

These are post-denominational times, are they not? Does the 'Baptist-thing' even matter any more? Will it all evaporate in a couple of generations? Perhaps, but I wager not. We have a family affinity that is, in my opinion, worth energising. Our heritage is dynamic and too little known. It is worth reclaiming. Our service and witness make a substantial impact in our Nation.

The future is as promising for Baptists as any faith community in Australia. We are brilliantly positioned to do even greater work. 'What COULD we be known for?'

Recently I was asked, 'What is a Baptist?' Not once, but three times.

A good friend and neighbour asked me. He is neither a church attender nor a particularly spiritual man. He is intelligent, justice-loving and pragmatic. He wants to know who we think we are.

A member of my family made the same inquiry. She has recently begun to worship with another denominational family in another state. They do things differently. They do things well. Her new situation has raised an identity question.

Neither of these is asking for a history lesson or a theology class. They want something thicker, more forward and more emotive. They want to know who I think I am. And to answer their question, I need to know who *you* think I am. That is how identity works.

Lance asked me. He is my young (24 yrs.) colleague in ministry. Having joyfully yielded to God's call upon his life he stepped away from a lucrative secular career. He has a right to ask and to receive a really good answer. What is a Baptist?

I can answer these individuals on my own. I have studied, reflected upon and lived in the Baptist way. But I'm looking for something more exciting than my private answer. I'm looking for a shared and celebrated Baptist identity. I want to tell them that Baptists are awesome, and so say all of us!

Identity is our 'sense of self'. In commercial terms we could talk about our Baptist 'brand'. Anthropologically we might call it 'culture'. Or we could borrow language from one of philosophy's favourite sons, Wittgenstein, and talk about our 'family resemblance' and the 'language game' we are invested in together.

Identity emerges as we see ourselves from each other's point of view. Identity becomes powerful when we articulate, symbolise and act out a consistent narrative – the story of ourselves.

### ***The small 'b' Baptists.***

It is telling to de-capitalise with pride. This is a way of saying: 'I have reservations'. 'I don't really fit with the rest of you.' Imagine me saying, 'I am a small 'd' Demond'. That would raise questions for you. 'What is Allan shrinking back from? What are the Demonds up to that Allan wants to distance himself from, eh?'

Self-proclaimed small 'b' Baptists are plentiful in Australia. Which is to say, we are shrinking back from each other. What would it take to stop shrinking back? How can we help one another capitalise the 'B' in Baptist? How can we capitalise on our brand (culture, family resemblance)?

Identity emerges from our words, symbols, stories and actions. We live our identity. This is why historians and theologians can't do all the work for us. Our scholarly friends play a vital role as coaches, interpreters and guides for the journey. But the family has to work it out together. The leaders of the clan enable and inspire this journey.

### ***We can explore four identity questions.***

#### *1. What language will we use?*

Words matter. When we call ourselves a 'movement' (as ABM has begun to do) we are making a beautiful claim about our future. We are telling each other who we aspire to be. I am inspired and keen to share that vision with young colleagues like Lance, and my neighbours and my family. I pray we will live up to it.

When we say: 'Our Baptist Union', much like 'Our Church', we draw a circle of inclusion, something not present when we say: 'The Union' or 'Your Church'. Our language betrays our attitudes and our aspirations. We thrive under the sound of encouragement, blessing and hope.

Solidarity and health come to those who work hard and achieve a common life-giving language. What words will 'We Baptists' use? Can we find a shared way to speak winsomely about ourselves?

#### *2. What symbols will we celebrate?*

Symbols sit along side our language as powerful communicators. Show someone the Nike 'tick' or the 'golden arches' and a stream of emotions and associations spills out (for better or for worse). A kiss on the cheek, a footie scarf and a steeple are all telling symbols. They draw circles of inclusion and exclusion. They presume a large shared story. They have meaning.

The sacred splash of baptismal water is huge for us Baptists. Not because of our heritage alone, but because of the sheer joy. When a new follower of Jesus is marked by the death and resurrection of our Saviour the whole family sends up a shout of praise – or so it should be. Maybe we could have baptism events at our Union Assembly meetings and make them awesome parties inviting the whole neighbourhood to join us.

What other symbols do we have? Can we use them better? What signs and codes are we unaware of? Our identity conversation may require some outside dialogue partners as well to help mirror our blind spots for us.

### *3. What stories will we tell?*

Narrative shapes culture. Jesus told stories and we love to hear and tell them. They hold our identity as Christians! What stories hold our identity as Baptists? We need to find, craft, tell and retell a handful of positive culture-driving stories.

We should lose some old jaded stories. 'Baptists don't ...', is a sorry old yarn. It makes for some bad jokes. Whether we are referencing a dance, a drink of wine, a deck of cards, or a non-Disney movie, today Baptists DO! Or more consistent with our way of telling the story: 'We don't, 'Don't', anymore.' The question is, 'What do we DO? What are our new positive stories?'

It would be powerful if we could answer, 'What is a Baptist?', with common stories such as:

- *'Baptists Serve and Suffer for Others.* Let me tell you a story of one of our amazing founders ...' Or,
- *'Baptists Do Local.* There is a group of Baptists down the road and they voted last year to engage someone local to work with our asylum seekers. (That's how we Baptists do things, we don't wait for Rome or Canterbury, we have local structures that can make good things happen quickly and accountably right here in our town, and the hierarchy is there to support our community.) Well, the Baptists raised the money to get this going and let me tell you what incredible things are happening ...' Or,
- *'We Baptists are Deeply Spiritual.* Everyone in our movement who is really serious, puts Jesus at the very centre. There was this Baptist woman, we all love to tell this story, she got down on her knees and ... then she opened her Bible and ... you won't believe what happened next ...'

You get the idea. Stories are powerful. We need to find our great stories, learn them and then teach each other (especially our leaders) how to tell them well.

### *4. What behaviours will we reward?*

Families tend to kiss and kick each other into a similar shape. A sort of attitudinal 'family resemblance' emerges over time. And it doesn't matter whether the rewards and punishments are overt and intentional or tacit and unconscious, the result is the same, it all shapes culture.

What is applause-worthy Baptist behaviour? How does one achieve a 'good-on-ya!' from the clan leaders? If we can offer consistent, life-giving, kingdom-centred, contemporary answers, we are on our way. If not, then we have work to do – good work, hard work, important work. Work that is likely to take a few years not a few days. Work that will challenge us, maybe divide us before it unites us. Work that will reward us in the end. I for one say, let's do it. Let's go to work!

When our young leaders and the newest participants in our movement can see clearly and agree passionately with the core behaviours we value and reward together, the tribe of small 'b' Baptists will wane. And the Kingdom of God will rise. Hallelujah!

### ***The Journey.***

I am a Baptist in search of my denominational self. This is a journey that I cannot take alone. I need you.

If we could find some ***language*** and a few powerful ***symbols*** that the majority of us enjoyed using, if we could collect and 'canonise' a handful of defining ***stories*** that we love to tell when our neighbours and our children ask 'What IS a Baptist?', and if we could name a half dozen culture-driving, God-pleasing ***behaviours*** that we WILL applaud in each other; then we would be on our way. And with God's help, 'Baptist' could become a powerful, positive 'new-word' serving the mission of Jesus in Australia.

I am a Baptist! Now, who do you say that I am?