

NEWSLETTER

Introduction: Assembly '08, the BUA and the NCCA

Greetings friends,

This is a special newsletter from *Baptist Evangelicals Today* putting the case against the upcoming motion at Assembly which supports the *Baptist Union of Australia* joining the *National Council of Churches in Australia*. We hope each person comes to an assembly debate as informed as they possibly can be in order to make the most reasoned and faithful decision they can. To that end we've collected a series of points that outline our opposition to the *BUA* seeking full member status with the *NCCA*, and we hope these points help to convince you of our case.

We believe this is important. We believe that people need to make a real effort to get to assemblies to discuss matters of significance to our denomination, but that there is a special duty to contribute when a mat-

ter as important as this is put before our churches. It stands to reason that those who don't go to the trouble of putting their view forward will have little right to complain when things do not go as they would like.

So please come to assembly and make your vote count. Think and pray about this vital issue and carefully consider the profound concerns expressed in these brief articles.



Matthew Arkapaw
Associate Pastor
Mortdale-Oatley Baptist
Church

Christian Unity

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (John 17:20-21)

Jesus prayed that his followers might be one. The question is how is this oneness or unity to be expressed? Did Jesus have in mind a structure like the National Council of Churches in Australia (*NCCA*)? Are we being disobedient to Jesus if we do not join? Some would say "yes." A closer look at Jesus' prayer will

show it must be otherwise.

Jesus' prayer comes just before his betrayal and arrest. As the cross looms on Jesus' horizon, this prayer gives us a window into Jesus' heart. It reveals his priorities. It reveals what he wants for the world and what he wants for his people.

The Motion

Canberra Baptist Church has lodged the following motion for consideration by the Assembly Annual General Meeting to be held on 18 September 2008:

That the Assembly of the Baptist Union of NSW supports the Baptist Union of Australia joining the National Council of Churches Australia as a full voting member.

The white paper regarding this motion and cases for and against can be found in the administration section of the BU website:

http://admin.baptistnsw.asn.au/_Media/notice_of_motions.pdf

This newsletter outlines a number of reasons for *opposing* this motion. Further copies of this newsletter can be downloaded from the BET website:

<http://bet.org.au>



Anthony Petterson, lecturer
in Old Testament, Morling

“The unity that Jesus speaks of is a unity that comes from a common assent to the apostolic gospel.”

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With Jesus’ imminent departure, he first prays first for his disciples who will be left in the world after he has gone (v. 11). He prays, “Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.” Note carefully from the verse *how* it is that his disciples will be one. Jesus says it will be as his Holy Father keeps them in his name - a name that has been given to Jesus also. What does this mean? In the Bible, God’s name is his character (e.g. Exodus 34:5). It is who he is. The interesting thing here is that Jesus says that this name has been given to him as well. However, this is not new. John’s Gospel has shown from the outset that the Son reveals the Father: “No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”

Therefore, the *basis* for the unity or oneness that Jesus prays for his disciples is in the first instance their knowledge of God that has come through Jesus. The unity Jesus speaks of is not an institutional unity (there is no institution or hierarchical structure on view in Jesus’ prayer). It is a oneness amongst Jesus’ followers that comes from a right belief about God that has been revealed in Jesus. The unity that Jesus envisages will be expressed in lives of holy obedience (v. 15) and testimony to him (v. 20).

Jesus’ prayer turns from his immediate disciples, to those who will believe in him through their word (v. 20). Here Jesus looks beyond his death and resurrection and his giving of the Spirit to

those who will believe in him through the testimony of his disciples. Here again, Jesus prays that they may be one (v. 21). It is a oneness that will be expressed between Jesus’ earlier and later followers and may also have Jews and Gentiles on view (*cf.* John 1:12-13). Regardless, the *basis* for the unity is belief in Jesus that comes through the testimony of the disciples (v. 20). Once again, unity is grounded in right belief about Jesus and the testimony to him (the gospel).

The agenda of the *NCCA* is to find some common areas of belief or practice where Christian unity can be expressed such as mission, sacraments, and use of buildings (see, for instance, the *NCCA National Covenant*). It is a futile effort and ironically only serves to underscore the real and significant differences. It is an agenda doomed to fail, because the unity that Jesus speaks of is a unity that comes from a common assent to the apostolic gospel. Yet it is the content of the gospel that many of the churches that make up the *NCCA* fundamentally disagree about. When Jesus prayed that his followers might be one, he could not have had the *NCCA* in mind because they are divided on the very basis of unity.

We must strive for unity in our churches, in our denomination, and with believers from other denominations. When Jesus’ followers are united it will attract others to Jesus, just as disunity turns people off. Christian unity is a testimony to the world (v. 23). But the only basis for true Christian unity is right belief about God that has been revealed through the apostolic testimony about Jesus.



Hefin Jones,
Associate Pastor,
Chatswood Church

The Ecumenical Dream

The National Council of Churches in Australia (*NCCA*) is the Australian expression of the global Ecumenical Movement whose central aspiration is the ‘full visible unity’ of its member churches. In the Ecumenical Movement’s own language, participating churches are on a ‘journey’, or a ‘pilgrimage’ towards ‘full visible

unity.’ The *Constitution* of the *NCCA* endorses this vision in 2.01 and 3.03, and in the *National Covenant* it makes more explicit the ecumenical pilgrimage already outlined in the *Constitution*. Constitutions are generally dull but necessary things, but the *National Covenant* represents the heartbeat of

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the **NCCA**, and in it 'full visible unity' is the clear goal.

The Ecumenical Journey

What is this 'journey'? And what is its goal, 'full visible unity'? The journey is motivated by the recognition of the scandal of real and apparent division amongst professing Christians. The journey begins with the realisation that Christ desires unity for the church and that disunity presents a hindrance when the church engages with the world. The journey is a pilgrimage, a walking *and* talking together, not only until a greater measure of unity is expressed, but hopefully until 'full visible unity' is achieved. To begin the journey one must recognise one's fellow pilgrims as being genuine fellow pilgrims and one must commit oneself to the journey's goal, hence the affirmations of the *National Covenant's Declaration of Intent* and the *Basis* (2.02) of the **NCCA Constitution**.

However, the goal of 'full visible unity' is somewhat undefined in the Ecumenical Movement, and the 'pilgrimage' is not always seen as a *journey* to a known goal but rather a *quest* for something whose precise nature and shape is yet to make itself clear. On the way to 'full visible unity' pilgrims can and do strongly disagree with one another about the precise nature of 'full visible unity.' In outline though, the *minimal* vision of 'full visible unity' is: - a common faith; mutually recognised and accepted baptism, eucharist (Lord's supper) and (ordained) ministry; common action in mission; and the full unqualified recognition of each other as churches. In this the **NCCA's National Covenant** reflects the proposals of the World Council of Churches (**WCC**).

Gospel Unity

What should we as Baptists make of this ecumenical dream? The desire for real unity between believers is right. Faith in Christ unites us to him, and as we are united to him we become united to one another. In fact those who believe in Christ, those who have the Spirit indwelling them, are already united to one another and have a responsibility to maintain and to protect and to promote that unity. But here's the rub: what is it that unites us to Christ? Faith in him as Saviour and Lord, faith in the Jesus revealed in the biblical gospel. It is the gospel that is

the means of unity. But the gospel also serves as a dividing line - there can be no real unity with those who do not believe the gospel. And further, there can be no real unity with those who claim to believe in a 'gospel' but whose teaching is no gospel at all.

The Gospel and The Ecumenical Movement

Unfortunately, the **NCCA** and its state and global equivalents, the NSW Ecumenical Council and the **WCC** have chosen not to adopt a common statement about the gospel as their basis. Their basis is excellent *in so far as it goes*, affirming the divinity and humanity of Jesus and his place in the Trinity, but this is not sufficient. The greatest divisions within the professing Christian world have been over the gospel itself. The voluntary associational character of the **NCCA** has been compared with some justice to the voluntary associational character of the Baptist Union, *but* the **BUNSW/ACT** has chosen to put the gospel front-and-centre in its doctrinal basis and statement of faith, whereas the **NCCA** has neglected to do so.

The *Covenant*, which the **NCCA** hope we will sign, requires us to recognise every other member denomination as genuine believers in Christ. I can believe that there are genuine believers in every denomination represented, but I know that some of the denominations officially hold to beliefs contradictory to the gospel, and other denominations have a track record that does not inspire confidence in their understanding or commitment to the gospel, or to the straightforward teaching of scripture. Once on the 'pilgrimage' the hopes are that we would increasingly participate in moves towards common understandings on sacraments, ministry and the use of resources. Already **WCC** statements on baptism represent serious problems to all evangelicals and Baptists in particular. For example, baptism has been given an interpretation that suggests baptismal regeneration, and suggestions have been made to ban anything that might be understood as re-baptism. So on the one hand the classic Baptist and evangelical understanding that baptism is not necessary

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“To join the NCCA but to refuse to ratify the Covenant’s Declaration of Intent would be to be like someone joining a local soccer team but to insist on never getting out on the field and playing.”



**Philip Calman,
Senior Pastor,
Chatswood
Baptist Church**

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to salvation is under threat, and on the other Baptists would be called on to refrain from ever baptising believers who were ‘baptised’ as infants in other denominations. On his recent visit to Sydney Pope Benedict XVI endorsed the *NCCA National Covenant* and positively underscored the role that baptismal regeneration plays in the thinking of the Ecumenical Movement. While membership of the *NCCA* does not commit us to membership of the *WCC*, the ecumenical thinking of the *NCCA* is clearly shaped by the *WCC*.

The NCCA, the BUA and Ecumenical Commitment

Does membership of the *NCCA* commit us to the ecumenical journey and ‘full visible unity’? While our representatives, the *BUA*, could technically join the *NCCA* by subscribing to its *Constitution*, senior officers of the *NCCA* have confirmed that at present every existing member of the *NCCA* has also signed at least *The Declaration of Intent* of the *National Covenant* and they hope that the *BUA* would at the very least do the same. The *Constitution* itself clearly outlines the *NCCA*’s agenda. To join the *NCCA* but to refuse to ratify the *Covenant’s Declaration of Intent* would be to be like someone joining a

local soccer team but to insist on never getting out on the field and playing. Joining the *NCCA* would commit us to the ecumenical journey. Certainly, within the *NCCA* there would be no coercion but the moral pressure will be on to get increasingly involved. As *NSW/ACT* Baptists we have united around a commonly held understanding of the gospel. We have as a union allowed some degree of legitimate variety of understanding and expression of faith in Christ, but the *NCCA* and the Ecumenical project it represents has not kept the gospel central and would commit us to legitimising false gospels as alternative viewpoints.

Documents referred to:

The *NCCA* Constitution.

http://www.ncca.org.au/about_us/how_we_work/constitution

The *NCCA* National Covenant.

http://www.ncca.org.au/departments/faith_unity_commission/_edit/_data/page/104/A_National_Covenant.pdf

Pope Benedict XVI’s Address to an Ecumenical Gathering in Sydney 18 July.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080718_ecumenism_en.html

“It isn’t us” or is it?

When the issue of whether or not we ought to support the Baptist Union of Australia joining the National Council of Churches was first raised at the last assembly, we were reminded several times that we were not talking about our state union but the *BUA*. While it was necessary to make this distinction, we ought to take no comfort in the fact that “*it isn’t us*” (our state union) that might join the *NCCA*. We also ought to not believe that because it is the *BUA* that this somehow lessens our assembly’s responsibility to offer the right counsel.

The *BUA* is a national ministry organization that takes its direction from the state unions. The representatives of the state unions direct the *BUA* and at this coming assembly we will make a decision about how our representative

ought to direct the *BUA* on our behalf. You might liken it to a local church taking seriously our Union assemblies by coming together to discuss the motions in order to direct its representatives. We would want each church to take its responsibility seriously for ultimately these decisions will shape our associational life. The same is true on the national level.

The *BUA* claims to represent us as Baptists across Australia. It asks our state unions for financial support so that it can run ministries and represent us on both a national and an international level. As one of the unions that make it up we need to inform the *BUA* whether it will, or will not, be representing our union of churches if it takes this step of joining the *NCCA*.

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I'm not sure whether the assemblies of each state were consulted or whether decisions were made without consultation by state representatives. I know every decision does not need or cannot be passed back to an assembly, but I believe that our leadership has done the right thing in passing on this issue

to us as churches to discuss together at assembly. For me this decision is a significant one, for I believe it is a departure from historical Baptist thought about the nature of the church and what it means to be united to Christ. For some of us such a decision has the potential to distort our understanding of the gospel itself.

Influence or Compromise?

Jesus repeatedly warned believers to watch out for those whose aim it is to deceive believers (Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 24; cf. Acts 20:29). It is the church's responsibility, especially to those who have been called to leadership positions, to be discerning as to the associations they make. One of the primary reasons given for joining organizations such as the **NCCA**, is in order to have a positive influence on them. Though this is a noble and sincere desire it is misplaced.

The simple truth of the matter is that in order to maintain unity and harmony, some of the more important doctrines are initially ignored, resulting in agreements on matters that are secondary in nature. Alternatively, some of the distinctiveness of evangelical truth is sacrificed for the sake of unity. David Wells highlights this trend in his book, "No Place for Truth" saying,

"Those who had marched gladly under the banner of evangelicalism and had affirmed the truths of historic Protestant orthodoxy now began to look sideways. As the theological centre began to give way, there arose a multitude of evangelical amalgams with, among other things, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, special interests such as feminism, the pieties of the World Council of Churches, and radical politics. The most important thing that this potential movement needed - theological unity - grew even thinner and more insubstantial."

Herein lies the real problem, *compromise* for the sake of unity. It is as inevitable as the rising of the sun. Compromise inevitably begins with the so called less important matters, but it is only a

matter of time before more important matters are watered down. Satan is no fool - he is much more likely to begin with "small matters" before moving on to bigger ones. Though the intention may be honourable (i.e. to exercise a positive influence), the result may often have far reaching negative consequences never initially intended!

Furthermore, when one generation opens the door, the next generation opens it even wider. Thus, it is vitally important that we not only consider the implications for our generation, but also for the generations to come! The "Downgrade Controversy," of which Spurgeon was a part, should sound an ominous warning to us. Thus, D. A. Carson warns us that,

"The more one studies contemporary evangelicalism, the more one senses the profound frustration that grips many of its leaders. The statistics say we should be powerful and influential, and we are not. The intellectuals think they should be followed, and they are largely ignored. The entrepreneurs and media stars act as if they will bring revival, and of course they don't...Theologians and historians and pastors alike continuously expand the definition of evangelicalism, but instead of drawing in a wider circle they are gutting what is central."

Therefore, it is much more important that we seek to influence the **NCCA** from a position of theological strength, rather than join them, which in all likelihood will ultimately result in a weakening of our theological distinctives. Such a result can only militate against the very thing we set out to do!



**Ian Deane,
Senior Pastor,
Castle Hill Baptist
Church**

"The simple truth of the matter is that in order to maintain unity and harmony, some of the more important doctrines are initially ignored, resulting in agreements in matters that are secondary in nature..."



Philip Calman,
Senior Pastor,
Chatswood
Baptist Church

“If the BUA is to join an ecumenical body such as the NCCA surely it ought to be because our churches want to play the ecumenical game and not just enjoy some of the benefits that NCCA offers its members.”



David Starling
lecturer in New
Testament and
Theology, Morling

“Unity for the sake of Utility?”

One of the two main arguments for joining the National Council of Churches is that it will provide a number of benefits for the agencies of the *BUA*. For instance it has been suggested that belonging to the *NCCA* will provide Baptist World Aid Australia (*BWAA*) with an internationally recognised touchstone of legitimacy. The implication seems to be that it will be easier for *BWAA* representatives to explain themselves to government officials who as yet haven’t heard of *BWAA*. In support of joining the *NCCA* Rev. Jim Barr also suggests that membership of the *NCCA* “is widely recognised nationally and internationally as the sign of churches that are ‘mainstream’ and to be trusted”.

This is an argument from utility. There are benefits in belonging that make joining attractive. While not wanting to knock back any benefit that belonging to a group might give us, these benefits are a secondary issue and ought not to sway our decision as to whether it is right to belong to the *NCCA*. It would be like someone deciding to join the local football team not because they wanted to play football but because the club offered a discount at *Rebel* for its members. If you join the club surely it is because you want to play footy. Likewise if the *BUA* is to join an ecumenical body such as the *NCCA* surely it ought

to be because our churches want to play the ecumenical game and not just enjoy some of the benefits that *NCCA* offers its members.

We need to be clear about this. The *NCCA* is an ecumenical body that wants its members to move towards a more visible expression of unity. The primary outworking of this is the *NCCA National covenant* that all of the member churches have agreed to, in some measure, already. This has involved them in things like: recognising one another’s communities as genuine communities of faith, hope and love; agreeing to share physical resources; agreeing together to recognise the sacrament of Baptism in each other’s churches and in some cases agreeing to work towards the goal of sharing with each other a mutually recognised ordained ministry. While the Rev. Jim Barr downplays this covenant in his case for joining the *NCCA*, the *Covenant* itself is the practical outworking of this desire for visible unity. It is what the *NCCA* is primarily about. It is the next step that naturally leads on from joining an ecumenical organization. While the *NCCA* might offer certain utilities to its members we ought not trade the real unity of the gospel for the type of unity that the *NCCA* offers.

Aren’t we already part of the NSW Council of Churches?

Some readers may be (understandably!) confused about why there would be any debate about whether Baptists in NSW should support the *BUA* joining the National Council of Churches when we ourselves are already part of the NSW Council of Churches. Why oppose joining the national body when we are members of the state one?

The answer is that there are some very significant differences between the NSW Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches. The *NSWCC* (which dates back to the 1920s) is a

coalition of evangelical Christian denominations (Sydney Anglicans, Baptists, Christian Reformed Churches, Churches of Christ, Fellowship of Congregational Churches, Presbyterian Church and Salvation Army). It operates on the basis of a shared commitment to the gospel of God’s grace in Christ and the supreme authority of the Scripture, and has a clear and useful set of purposes, consistent with our own beliefs and mission:

to “promote unity and united

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action among evangelical churches in NSW, encourage fellowship and discussion between member churches, support strategies for evangelical outreach, mission and ministry, apply biblical and theological principles to contemporary issues and engage local, state and federal governments on public policy issues.”

The equivalent of the **NCCA** in NSW is not the **NSW Council of Churches** but the **NSW Ecumenical Council**, which was set up in 1946 in order to promote the ecumenical cause within the state, and has a list of member churches very similar to the member churches of the **NCCA**. Baptists in NSW have never joined the NSW Ecumenical Council, for the same reasons why we have never encouraged the **BUA** to join the **NCCA**.

How can we express unity in practice?

Section 3.03 of the **NCCA** constitution says in part: *It is hoped that through further dialogue the member Churches will ... move towards a more visible expression of the unity Christ has given to his church.*

The visible unity being spoken of relates to institutional recognition or structural unity, and occasional joint statements, not a practical working together of evangelical churches seeking to share the gospel. It is not as though opposing involvement in the **NCCA** constitutes a lack of love for our fellow believers in other denominations, even less that we don't want to work with others in sharing the gospel. Baptist churches across NSW and the ACT already have many expressions of visible unity with churches of other denominations, and joining the **NCCA** would not further such gospel ministry. These expressions range from combined education boards that ensure scripture teachers are provided to local public schools, to regional men's and women's events, to city-wide evangelistic campaigns.

In the Illawarra there are many such

expressions that are facilitated by local churches. There are active ministers' fellowships and monthly prayer breakfasts that engender joint partnerships for the sake of the kingdom of God. In Wollongong there was the citywide evangelistic campaign in 2000 called 'Harvest', and the combined education board has expanded high school scripture into a second high school in the past two years and seen many students reached. This week there were over 25 ministers gathered from across the Illawarra, the Southern Highlands and the Shoalhaven who committed their churches to the 'Jesus all about life' advertising campaign for September 2009.

Visible unity with efficacy is seen when local churches work with other local churches for the sake of the gospel. This is where we should seek our expressions of common fellowship in Christ.

“Points of Difference”: How wide the divide?

In his argument in favour of the **BUA** joining the **NCCA**, Rev. Jim Barr compares the differences we would have with other members of the **NCCA** to the differences between Baptist churches within the same Union. He concedes that the **NCCA** “embraces a far great breadth of conviction and practice than any Baptist association”, but when he gives examples of what

this might mean, the diversity he describes sounds no more alarming than the diversity within the average Bible college or beach mission team:

‘Naturally, there are points of difference between Baptists and some member churches of the NCCA (such as the mode of baptism, the nature of ordination, and doctrines such as predestination and “sign gifts”).’

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Rodney Bayley,
Senior Pastor,
Wollongong Baptist Church

“Baptist churches across NSW and the ACT already have many expressions of visible unity with churches of other denominations, and joining the NCCA would not further such gospel ministry.”

David Starling
lecturer in New Testament and Theology, Morling

Baptist Evangelicals Today

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“...there is a vast gulf of difference between member churches about issues that go to the very heart of the gospel.”

Annual Assembly

The annual General Assembly will be held at 1 pm on Thursday 18 September 2008 at Sydney Olympic Park Sports Centre, Olympic Boulevard, Olympic Park, Homebush.

In reality, the differences that we would have with many of the **NCCA** denominations go much deeper than that.

The **NCCA's** basis of union borrows language from the basis of the World Council of Churches, and speaks of admitting to membership

“Churches and Christian communities which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures... to the glory of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Whilst this is obviously a description that Baptists would want to identify with wholeheartedly, it says so little about what it means for Jesus Christ to be ‘God and Saviour’, that in practice there is a vast gulf of difference between member churches about issues that go to the very heart of the gospel.

Jesus Christ as God

On the issue of what it means for Jesus to be ‘God... according the Scriptures’, we would be joining in the **NCCA** with the Society of Friends (Quakers), who explain in their official website:

‘Quakers... do not believe inspiration is confined to one sacred book or that Truth can be defined by a creed. Many Quakers see Jesus as an example of life guided by God, and find that Jesus can show us how to live and love.’

Jesus Christ as Saviour

On the issue of what it means for Jesus to be ‘Saviour’, we would be joining in the **NCCA** with the Roman Catholic Church that stands by its verdict handed down at Trent against the doctrine justification by faith alone:

‘If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to co-

operate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema.’

In a similar vein, the Eastern Orthodox churches (which make up five of the 17 member denominations of the **NCCA**) gathered together at the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672 and declared:

‘[The idea] that faith can fulfil the function of a hand that lays hold on the righteousness which is in Christ, and can then apply it unto us for salvation, we know to be far from all Orthodoxy.’

Whilst there is some debate among Orthodox theologians today about the continuing authority of the Synod of Jerusalem, its declarations on grace and salvation have never been officially overturned by an Orthodox synod.

Gospel unity and division

Writing to the Galatians, Paul made it clear that it was ‘not in line with the truth of the gospel’ (2:14) for Peter to withdraw from table fellowship with Gentiles because he feared the circumcision party: there are times when separation is a denial of the gospel. But Paul also made it clear in the same letter - and in the strongest of terms - that there are times when separation from people who are ‘preaching a gospel contrary to the one you received’ (1:9) is essential.

There are many contexts in which we will choose as Baptists to join in partnership with fellow believers who believe the same gospel of grace and differ from us on issues that are secondary to the truths of the gospel. The **NCCA** is not such a partnership.

Baptist Evangelicals Today

BET is a network of evangelical Baptist pastors who are keen to promote evangelical belief and ministry among New South Wales Baptists.

We believe that as Australian Baptists we are privileged to have a strong evangelical heritage but we should never take this heritage for granted. Each generation needs to both promote and defend the truth of the gospel and **BET** aims to do both of these things by acting as a catalyst among Baptists for evangelical thought and discussion on a variety of issues.

We hope, through a variety of ways, to promote a dialogue between Baptists that is true to the Scriptures and therefore also to the evangelical faith.

For more information on **Baptist Evangelicals Today** contact Philip Calman, philip@chatswoodbaptist.com.au

Or, visit our website where you can subscribe to our biannual journal and find out about up-coming events: <http://bet.org.au>