

# **Are Doctrinal Confessions Un-Baptist?**

## **Some Historical Reflections on the NSW Basis of Union**

### **The Carey Connection**

Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> April 1851 saw the first recorded Baptist ordination in NSW. The Church was the week-old Parramatta Baptist Church. The Ordinand was William H. Carey, grandson of missionary pioneer William Carey. Within the space of a week the church decided its character as an open communion closed membership Baptist Church, set apart its first deacons, declared its doctrines, and called and ordained its minister. Soon after the ordination the church published its detailed "Constitution and Laws."<sup>1</sup>

One of the most striking aspects of the whole church formation and ordination process is the prominence given to the theological character of the church and the convictions of its pastor. On the day the church was formed they wrote to their prospective pastor informing him of their doctrinal position, which was virtually identical to the 1813 basis of the Baptist Union in Britain. Carey responded by letter affirming those doctrines and also providing a restatement of them in his own words.

*"With reference to the doctrines mentioned in your letter, I consider them to be most thoroughly scriptural. I concur with you in believing them one and all, and in my pulpit ministrations shall hope to proclaim them freely, and in the strength and by the aid of the Spirit of God..."*

*(W.H. Carey to Parramatta Baptist, 15 April 1851)*

At his ordination Carey not only recounted his testimony and call to ministry but also declared his belief in the "leading doctrines of our religion" by publicly affirming a series of doctrinal statements. The church constitution he wrote emphasises the "articles of their faith" which are given a leading position, larger script, and underlining. All members of the church were to give assent to the doctrines listed and sign the rules.

Is this anything more than an interesting sidelight on the early Baptist Movement in NSW? First, it gives the lie to the idea that Baptists, and in particular NSW Baptists, are inherently and have historically been a non-creedal movement. Second, it raises a number of issues surrounding the use of doctrinal statements in the life of Baptist churches. Should churches and associations of churches have such statements? Are they merely descriptive or somehow definitive? And what about us? Can we and should we as NSW Baptists affirm and subscribe to creeds and confessions today?

### **Three Approaches to Baptist Doctrinal Statements**

Since the Mid-Nineteenth Century we have been frequently told that we are an inherently non-creedal movement. Some have rejected all creeds, all confessions, all statements of faith<sup>2</sup>. Others have sought to distinguish between creeds and confessions. Yet others have rejected the idea of

subscription. However, a careful reading suggests there is considerable confusion caused by inconsistent definitions and fuzzy arguments. Not all anti-creedalism or non-creedalism is the same. For the purposes of this essay I'll distinguish three approaches towards creeds, confessions and confessional subscription amongst Baptists using the following categories: *Anti-Creedalism*; *Non-Creedal Confessionalism*; and *Confessionalism*. Arguably each of these approaches emerged within the first century of the English Baptist movement. All three approaches can be seen at play in the early history of the Baptist movement in NSW. The first three pastors of the foundational Bathurst Street Baptist Church, Saunders, Ham and Voller, seem to embody the three approaches.

*Anti-Creedalism* rejects subscription to doctrinal statements and seeks to do without them altogether. For James Voller doctrinal statements had no role in defining the belief of the church and he removed as many as he could from the church's constitutional documents. As the instigator of the abortive Baptist Association of NSW (1858) he proposed associational rules that contain no explicit doctrinal statements nor any form of subscription.

*Non-Creedal Confessionalism* rejects the idea that a church or association might require subscription to *normative* doctrinal statements, but allows entirely voluntary affirmations of belief and the publishing of *descriptive* doctrinal statements. This seems to have been the position of John Saunders who was quite willing to affirm his own "creed" and led the church to adopt trust deeds which initially (1836) referred to the Westminster Shorter Catechism (minus the section on infant baptism) and later (1844) the 1813 doctrinal basis of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. However, Saunders was reluctant to impose his "creed" on other Baptists and argued that his wing of the Baptists had no custom of having creeds. In arguing this he was representative of one common mid-nineteenth century view. Particular Baptists had long held that it was inappropriate for the state to impose a creed, but by the early nineteenth century some were also arguing that it was inappropriate for the denomination to insist on normative doctrinal statements as a test of fellowship. At most, doctrinal statements were *descriptive* rather than *definitive* or *normative*. Other Particular Baptists like Andrew Fuller rejected this argument and argued that a voluntary association had the right to form its own rules including normative doctrinal statements<sup>3</sup>.

*Confessionalism* sees doctrinal statements as *definitive* and *normative* and would require some form of subscription to them. John Ham's influence on the formation of Parramatta Baptist and the ordination of William H. Carey is evident in the documents preserved, and his high view of the place of doctrinal statements is reflected in the call and ordination process. Such *Confessionalism* was no new thing within the Baptist Movement. The early Particular Baptists had written extensive confessions in the Seventeenth Century and required subscription to them from time to time. Local associations in England had their own confessions and often required subscription to them. Many English churches normally included doctrinal statements within their church covenants, constitutions, rules and trusts. Regular Baptists in the American Colonies did the same<sup>4</sup>. When a national body was begun in 1812-13 the English Particular Baptists drew up a doctrinal basis. Andrew Fuller, one of the founders, understood such

statements as definitive and normative rather than merely descriptive. Ham was following a well-established Particular Baptist approach, though one which was under assault by the mid-nineteenth century.

A principled rejection of *any* doctrinal statements, what I've called *Anti-Creedalism*, is not an inherent Baptist principle or distinctive. Though occasionally seen before the nineteenth century, it seems to have taken off under the influence of Cambellite ideas<sup>5</sup>, nineteenth century pan-evangelicalism, and the appeal to "liberality of thought"<sup>6</sup>. An avoidance of subscription to confessions, or an avoidance of imposing of subscription on others, i.e. *Non-Creedal Confessionalism*, has a longer history extending back to the end of the seventeenth century, and by the end of the nineteenth century it morphs into seeing doctrinal statements as merely descriptive or personal. Side-by-side and quite probably predating that position is *Confessionalism*, the view that doctrinal statements are normative and should be used to define associational fellowship. Neither *Anti-* nor *Non-Creedalism* is intrinsic to Baptist identity.

## Maximal verses Minimalist Confessionalism

Were *Anti-* or *Non-Creedalism* intrinsic to Baptist identity then NSW Baptists as a denomination have never been true to it. Voller's abortive Baptist Association of 1858 might have approximated the *Anti-Creedal* ideal, but from the beginning of the NSW Baptist Union in 1868 it has been *Confessional*, the real question being, *how Confessional?* Unlike the associational rules of 1858 the 1868 constitution included a doctrinal basis. However, it was a *Minimalist* basis:

*The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments shall be received as the entire and complete revelation of God to Mankind and shall be the only rule of faith and practice. And we receive all Baptist Churches and Baptised Christians, who rest upon the work of Christ alone for salvation and believe that the salvation of the sinner can be effectively secured only by the Holy Spirit's operations.*

The churches had considered a "lengthy" doctrinal basis but rejected it. What the "lengthy" basis was we do not know, but many Seventeenth Century Baptist confessions contain thirty or more detailed articles. The "brief" basis adopted is explicit in its affirmation of three or so doctrines and clearly implies a couple more. In order to accommodate open membership churches the second sentence of the basis was dropped in 1870. The single sentence basis would have been unobjectionable to most *Anti-Creedalists*. However, by 1872 a model trust deed was adopted and promoted by the Union which enshrined an expanded yet brief doctrinal basis, only very slightly different from our doctrinal basis today:

*'Holding the doctrines of the sinfulness of man; the divinity of Jesus Christ and his atonement for the sin of man; the need of the Holy Spirit for conversion; the divine inspiration of the Scriptures; the resurrection of the dead, and rewards and punishments in a*

*future state; and practicing the baptism of believers only by immersion.'*

Ministers and churches had to hold to these doctrines and ministers could be removed for ceasing to hold them. This doctrinal basis fully replaced the *radical Minimalism* of the 1870 basis when the Union's constitution was revised in 1894 and has remained the Doctrinal Basis of the Union ever since. Though varieties of *Anti-Creedalism* have been expressed repeatedly since the 1870s to the present, the Model Trust Deeds of 1872, the Union Constitution of 1894, the Incorporation Act of 1919 all enshrine a form of *Minimalist Confessionalism*. The *1919 Doctrinal Basis* is a definitive and normative doctrinal statement.

### **The 1919 Basis and the 1979 Statement**

However, the Union's official history criticised the doctrinal basis as "defective" and dissatisfaction with it led to the development and adoption of the *BUNSW 1979 Statement of Beliefs*. One can understand the criticism of the *1919 Basis*. It is so brief that it omits doctrines that one would expect any Christian statement to include, it seems disorderly, and its phrases are terse to the point of vagueness. Placed back in its original context 1872-1919 one can see how it was intended to guard certain key Evangelical truths without excluding Arminians on the one hand or Calvinists on the other. Given the known doctrinal beliefs and emphases of some involved in its framing, they seem to have also deliberately avoided including overly specific eschatological schemes. The wisdom of the *1919 Basis* is its focus on essentials. Its folly is that it simply took too much for granted.

In comparison, the *1979 Statement* is better organised, more complete and fuller in detail. The *1919 Basis* headings were supplemented, expanded and explained. Now there is explicit mention of God the Father, God as triune, Christ as fully human, the Holy Spirit as personal, humanity's creation, justification by faith, the Church, the Communion and the return of Christ. In its headings it is of similar level of comprehensiveness as the 1813 British Particular Baptist Basis or the 1851 Parramatta articles of faith, though in its expanded articles it maintains a balanced refusal to privilege Arminian or Calvinist views. One can even hear some echoes of the 1851 Parramatta articles that had been lost in the terseness of the *1919 Basis*. A well-known lacuna is the *1979 Statement's* lack of fullness on the bodily resurrection of Jesus. However, on the whole it is a well-balanced Evangelical statement of faith with the addition of a single Baptist distinctive (The article on the church is hardly distinctively Baptist). Even though much expanded in comparison to the *1919 Basis* it is still *Minimalist*, describing Baptist belief far less comprehensively and exhaustively than the *Maximalist* General and Particular Baptist confessions of faith of the Seventeenth century.

I believe this form of *Minimalism* is wise since the statement is neither so terse as to be vague, nor so detailed as to divide fellowship between people who hold the same Gospel and maintain like church order. It is wise since it focuses on the substance of the heart of the Bible, without reducing it to a series of litmus test beliefs. The *1979 Statement* is in effect an exposition of the

Gospel – the gracious death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our sins in order we might have forgiveness and resurrection hope, received through faith – plus some of the necessary presuppositions of that Gospel and some of the actual ramifications of it too. The presuppositions include: who this Jesus is, and who God is; what sin is and why it needs atonement; who we are and what state we are in; where we learn this Gospel from... The ramifications include the nature of the life of the believer and the community to which they now belong.

Our statement of beliefs is not to be imposed by the state, nor does it define who is or isn't Christian (no Baptist confession has ever done that), but it does provide a centre around which we can associate freely. In this life, in this world, and from our human point of view, the degree of association depends on the extent of our agreement, and where we can agree to disagree.<sup>7</sup> Common confession of the Gospel is surely the place to start. When it comes to institutional unity any given Evangelical's ecclesiology will come into play and determine the closeness of unity that can be achieved. In certain contexts Gospel-believing Baptists can have extremely close fellowship and cooperation with Gospel-believing Pentecostals, Wesleyans, Reformed Paedo-Baptists, Episcopalians et al and etc. In other contexts Gospel-Believing Baptists can only have limited institutional cooperation with other Gospel-Believers because of our mutually incompatible ecclesiologies. Like a number of earlier Baptists I would argue that voluntary associationalism does not preclude the association having the right to determine who it will include or exclude. Unity around the Gospel & our Baptist ecclesiology implies maintaining that unity by excluding those who deny the Gospel as it has been understood among us. To say that is not un-Baptist, but is true to the oldest Baptist confessionalist approach and agrees with the purpose of the *1919 Basis* as originally formulated in the 1872 Model Trust Deed.

### **Where are we today?**

But where are we today? The *1979 Statement* is best understood as only an explanation of the *1919 Basis*. However, some churches have adopted the *1979 Statement* as their basis of faith. Some officers of the Union have to subscribe to it, and as I understand it, so do teaching staff at Morling College. The Union's Committee for the Ministry are also required to ascertain a candidate for accreditation's "stance" towards the *1979 Statement*. The Union Handbook's preamble to the *1979/2003 Statement of Beliefs* raises certain questions. It describes the Statement as "approved" – but for what exactly? In fact, strictly the Statement was "adopted" by the 1979 Assembly. Recent Union Handbooks have also described the *1979/2003 Statement* "as a statement of beliefs commonly held by Baptists" – which seems to relegate it into the *non-creedal confession* category.<sup>8</sup> These issues deserve further exploration in the future. However, it seems to me that committed Evangelicals would do well to celebrate the doctrines embodied in the *1979 Statement*. It would also serve the association well if the Committee for the Ministry transparently fed-back to assembly the stance of accreditation candidates towards the *1979 Statement*. One wonders to what extent the current malaise of our Union is traceable to our neglect of the gospel and self-conscious unity in it as expressed by the *1979 Statement*?

The “defective” 1919 *Basis* remains the *minimalist confession* of the Union. The Union should not knowingly accredit a minister who could not in all conscience subscribe to it or who demonstrably denies it. Likewise the trustees of the Property Trust would be obliged to step in if a minister of a trust church demonstrably denied the 1919 *Basis*. So its function in the Act of Incorporation and the Property Trust Act make it a definitive and normative doctrinal statement, but its terseness makes it questionably effective. Further as Philip Calman argues in his article, the detail of the Property Trust Act, especially as amended in 1992, undermines the role of the 1919 *Doctrinal Basis* as an instrument of unity for a voluntary association of churches.

I suspect that both the 1919 *Basis* and the 1979/2003 *Statement* are too often regarded as hoops through which one must jump. For some they are hardly the kinds of thing to which they’d wish to give hearty assent. One wonders if the centre of interest for some Baptists lies elsewhere than the Gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus for our sins and our redemption? How many of us would be as forthright as Paramatta Baptist of 1851 and William H. Carey in declaring our beliefs? The whole idea of freely associating around a clear proclamation of the Gospel seems to have fallen on hard times. The idea of maintaining that unity and guarding the Gospel has fallen on even harder times.

Progressive and so-called “Mainstream” Baptists will paint the idea of Baptist confessionalism as somehow “un-Baptist” or at least as wisely discarded historical wreckage. However, it is hard to deny that a broad and long stream of Baptist heritage has seen the wisdom and utility of confessions and subscribing to them. For Evangelical Baptists it will not be the fact that this is our heritage, but it will be the scriptural wisdom that our heritage reflects that will persuade us to unite around and guard the Gospel (2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:2; Titus 1:9). Having said that, merely defending the confessions themselves will be of no avail unless we also embrace and embody the truth they express.

*“I beg also to state that I cordially and sincerely subscribe to the doctrines recorded in your letter and incorporated in your trust deeds – I may add they have formed the basis of my ministry for nearly 30 years past & I trust they will ever constitute the basis of my ministrations as well as the foundation of my hope for future blessedness.”*  
(Ham to Saunders, 1847)

*“Such are the doctrines I believe most firmly that the scriptures teach us, and these are they which I shall hope to preach among you. May the Lord give us grace to understand and to profit by them, that thus they may make that impression upon our lives, which they were of God designed, and revealed to produce.”*  
(Carey to Parramatta, 1851)

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<sup>1</sup> The first Parramatta Church Book is one of the treasures of the BUNSW Archives. The "Constitution and Laws" (1851) of Parramatta Baptist have been printed in an appendix to *Baptists in the Cradle City* available from the Baptist Historical Society.

<sup>2</sup> The large compilations by Lumpkin and McBeth undermine the facile claim of Baptist *anti-creedalism*. Both compilers would themselves be *non-creedal confessionalists*, while a number of texts included in their compilations are clearly *confessionalist*. William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, Judson Press; H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, Broadman Press.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Fuller and J.H. Hinton were agreed at the foundation of the Baptist Union that "unity of faith in the great doctrines of the gospel" was necessary, and "so far as we are united in them, we are likely to form a Christian Union..." J.H. Hinton, *The Nature and Purpose of a Baptist Union*, 1812. The 1813 meeting adopted an eleven point Evangelical-Calvinist basis.

<sup>4</sup> Particular Baptists in America adopted the 1749 *Essay on the Power of an Association* which says "Such churches there must be agreeing in doctrine and practice and independent in their authority and church power, before they can enter into a confederation" which goes on to articulate the right of the association to exclude a church on the grounds of doctrinal deviation or defection.

<sup>5</sup> Ironically ex-Presbyterian Alexander Campbell who founded the Church of Christ movement was charged by the Beaver Baptist Association of Philadelphia in 1829 with holding the *error* of "Churches need no creed but the Scriptures."

<sup>6</sup> Many modern Baptist *Anti-Creedalists* are in fact *Crypto-Creedalists* who hold a number of so-called Baptist Distinctives or Principles and use them to exclude by definition other Baptists from 'the mainstream'.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hinton op. cit. and the 1749 *Essay*.

<sup>8</sup> I have it on authority that "as a statement of beliefs commonly held by Baptists" was approved by Assembly on the suggestion of Mr. Fred Church and it has appeared in the preamble printed in the 2001, 2002, 2008 & 2009 Handbooks, and a similar statement has appeared in the Handbook's introductory pages since 1989. *Thus far* I have not been able to find the point when Assembly approved it. At the 1976 Assembly a similar proposal by Mr. Church was defeated.