Baptist Identity
Immersed through Worship

In this paper, I want to suggest that a theology of baptism of believers by immersion is the fundamental basis of our identity as Baptist communities. It gives the essential Trinitarian and missionary character to all our worship and our lives as faith communities. In short, if we know what baptism means to us, we also know who we are and how we worship: and not only worship as gathered people, but worship God with all we do and are. We are called to be communities who are immersed in the life of God, in acts and lives of worship.

Story of an Aboriginal Ritual

I would like to begin with a story about a ritual practice which occurs in a number of Australian aboriginal communities. I must explain that I am not part of such a community, and have no place in any such ritual. I know only what I have been told.

First, we need to understand that every baby born into an aboriginal community belongs to a totem group. Family groups have a totem, which is often an animal. For those people, this animal is their direct link with the created order. They belong to this group and one thing they will never do is eat that animal. This totemic system thus ensures the preservation of all the species. It is also the basis for preventing inter-marriage, as you can never marry within your totem group.

When a child is born, she is given a name, and by birth she already belongs to a totem family. Soon after birth, a naming ceremony, as we might call it, occurs. A hole is dug in the earth big enough for the baby to rest in. She is ceremonially placed in this soil, signifying that the earth is our mother, as they say. We come from the earth and we go to the earth.

But then the baby is bathed in oil. This oil is in fact the body fat of the totem animal: the body of the animal has been boiled down until its body fat is liquid and is then used to bath the child all over. Then the baby is lifted into the air: signifying that she may go in all directions, following the four winds, but wherever she goes she always belongs to this place, this land, this country.
Then the baby is washed in water, to remove any evil spirits that may surround her: and thus she is set free to live, in her place, with her people, in her name.

As it is explained to me, this ceremony suggests a life orientation. The child from the outset belongs. Through this ceremony, the person can speak of their place, their people and their name. This is not something they can ever remove or lose, even though they may travel, or be removed from their place and their people. This identity also involves obligations, relationships and expectations, on all sides. Belonging is a way of life: it draws the child into that life, and it gives the child that life.

I would like to suggest to you that Christian baptism is meant to function in this way: far more than the highly individualistic and experiential focus that it has in contemporary practice. It is meant to be the most fundamental expression of our life, our identity, our place in the scheme of things. If there was some way our churches could recover these dimensions of Christian baptism, which I believe are inherently biblical, then the Church would be transformed in the character of its life as a missionary community. I would like therefore to explore the implications of our baptism and some other worship practices, as a basis for understanding Baptist identity.

A Crisis in Baptismal Identity

It seems to me that we have, in many places, a crisis in baptism. Recently I asked a group of students (all active in local church ministry) whether they would see it as a central goal of their ministry to get people to be baptised, and most said ‘No’, because they found that it was not meaningful to their people. It isn’t a meaningful thing to do. What has happened to us that committed Christians, young and old, need to be persuaded that baptism is a meaningful thing for them to do? To begin with, it suggests an individualistic understanding of faith, and baptism. I will be baptised if someone can convince me that it is meaningful or worthwhile for me. Second, it clearly shows that in many churches people come to faith and discipleship without baptism being a part of that: it’s a kind of optional add-on. This contrasts starkly with Acts 2:41 where we read that all who welcomed Peter’s message were baptised: it was the thing to do, immediately. So, against a background of a widespread loss of the significance of baptism, I want to suggest that our baptismal heritage offers rich resources for understanding the whole of our identity as Christian communities. I want to suggest that our worship, and with it our whole
lives as a communal priesthood offered to God, can be understood through the metaphor of baptismal worship. Baptist communities are called to be immersed, continually, in the life of God and the mission of God's Spirit. This is our reasonable worship (Rom. 12:1). Our gatherings for worship and our practices in worship give expression, and further stimulus to our individual and collective lives of worship: the collective priestly offering of all the believers. It is into this life that we are baptised. Our baptism is the symbol of this life of immersion in God.

**Three Dimensions of Baptismal Practice**

As a brief articulation of this perspective, I would like to suggest three dimensions of baptismal practice which also indicate the character of our life together as an immersed community.

First, the Christian believer is baptised into a community of God's people called the Church. The baptismal act immerses us in the life of this people of God and directs us to the life of Christ shared with, among and in this community. The London Confession of 1644 describes this group as "called and separated from the world, by the word and the Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel, being baptised into that faith, and joyned to the Lord, and each other, by mutuall agreement, in the practical injoyment of the Ordinances, commanded by Christ their head and King".  

What we see here is that the community of faith, the Church, is the community which is made alive (regenerated) by Christ, through the Spirit. Sacramentalists, and some streams of baptistic thought, may wish to argue that it is baptism itself which effects this regeneration; others resist this view. Whichever line we take, the point at issue here is that those who have been baptised are now participants in a living body, the body of Christ, who is, in this paragraph, described as the head and king of this body.

So we see another of the central biblical images of the Church here, the body of Christ. Along with it the paragraph also clearly identifies the medium of Christ's reign, the Spirit.

It is on this basis that from the outset Baptists (along with all orthodox Christians) have baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In this act, we are immersed into the mission of God. Christians are, through baptism, directed to the life of Christ, not only

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as an example in the past but, through the Spirit’s enabling, a way of living in the present. This is an ontological as well as an ethical claim: the baptised are alive in Christ. The risen Christ lives in them and they live in him. The Anabaptist ‘Waterland Confession’ sets this out very clearly, identifying the ‘internal’ spiritual significance of baptism.

The whole action of external, visible baptism places before our eyes, testifies and signifies that Jesus Christ baptizes internally in a layer of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, the penitent and believing man: washing away, through the virtue and merits of his poured out blood, all the spots and sins of the soul and through the virtue and operation of the Holy Spirit, which is true, heavenly, spiritual and living water, [washing away] the internal wickedness of the soul and renders it heavenly, spiritual and living in true righteousness and goodness. Moreover baptism directs us to Christ and his holy office by which in glory he performs that which he places before our eyes, and testifies concerning its consummation in the hearts of believers and admonishes us that we should not cleave to external things, but by holy prayers ascend into heaven and ask from Christ the good indicated in it (baptism): a good which the Lord Jesus graciously concedes and increases in the hearts of those who by true faith become partakers of the sacraments. ²

The confession here is that the baptised believers receive from Christ, through the Spirit, a new and spiritual life. We are immersed into the life of God in Christ, to reach out for the things Christ sets before us: true righteousness and goodness. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are presented here as the mediums through which we participate in this divine life, this new creation.

God forgive us for the times we have presented baptism (merely) as a necessary thing so that people can vote at the church meeting! Baptism is nothing less than the effective symbol of our individual and collective, once and continual, immersion in the mission and life of God, laid out before us in Christ as a good news invitation, and made effective in and through us by God’s Spirit.

So our baptismal practice, in our heritage, has these three dimensions: we are immersed into the community of God’s people; we are immersed into the body of Christ; and we are immersed into the life of the Spirit. These dimensions of baptismal practice (which are our ecclesiology)

² W.J. McGlothlin’s translation of the 1580 Confession of the “Waterlanders” is reproduced in Lumpkin, Baptist Confessions of Faith. The section quoted is Article XXXII. Lumpkin, op cit, pp. 60-61.
suggest that we need to recover a more clearly theological understanding of what is actually happening in baptism. Here I sense that our concern to avoid elements of sacramentalism has robbed us a proper focus on what God is doing in the baptismal drama. We have made it so much something we do; and as Western culture has become more and more individualist, people have seen their baptism as something they do, even to the point where individuals arrange their own baptismal services, choosing locations, time and place, guest lists, music and readings, and who is to perform the act. In these situations, baptism has lost its churchly character and become an optional ritual which people may or may not find meaningful. As a consequence, the Church has lost this baptismal sense of its very identity.

A Drama of Three Actors

Christian baptism needs to be seen as a drama of three actors. The main actor in the drama of baptism is God. Baptism is an act of God, who makes real the power of Christ's resurrection in the lives of women and men today.

God the Holy Spirit baptises. We are indeed baptised by the Spirit and in the Spirit: this is not some separate or subsequent event, this is the very meaning of baptism. It may be possible to distinguish what the Pentecostals call water-baptism from spirit-baptism, but this separation is not supported by the scripture: it makes water baptism into something too human. Baptism for Jesus is with water and the spirit (John 3.5) or, as we see it in Acts, people are baptised with water and immediately receive the Spirit (Acts 2. 38, and many other instances. The story of Simon the silversmith in Acts 8. 9 - 24 is surely presented as the exception which proves the rule).

The God who raised Jesus from the dead, by the agency of the Spirit, is also the one who raises us, through baptism, and makes the resurrection a reality in our being.

Secondly, there comes an individual, who makes the response of repentance, a genuine turning to God in response to the good news of resurrection reality.

This is a response of faith, which shows itself as trust, hope and obedience. Faith is not exhausted by the idea of believing; indeed it is so much more that believing may well be a minor part of it: it is much more a response of trusting and doing. The response of faith is a life, not just an intellectual assent. In any event, though, baptism is a response to the
message and reality of God's redemptive work in Christ, reaching individuals in the here and now with the reality of Christ's living presence. The response of faith is the individual's positive engagement with that reality.

And then, thirdly, there is the community: people are not baptised by ministers, they are baptised by the community of faith, by the Church. The congregation does not witness a baptism, as a spectator event: the congregation is active in the whole drama, bringing that person to baptism, sharing the faith-commitment, itself affirming what they affirm and receiving what they receive, and celebrating their new birth, and in so doing the community receives this new member and commits itself to their care and nurture. This is a very active role. The community involved in baptism is indeed one of the gifts of God to every new Christian, a family of faith in which to grow.3

All this suggests to me that baptism is a performative act. It effects orientation to the life of God. Just as Jesus in his own baptism was nourished by the Spirit as God's chosen and beloved, and directed with overtones of the Servant figure in Isaiah towards his mission of service and suffering, so too our baptism identifies us with God and gathers us into God's continuing mission in this world.4

One way in which Baptists have tried to express these implications of baptism, at times in our history, has been through the laying on of hands. Biblically, the laying on of hands is associated with calling and commissioning. Amongst early Baptist communities, there was an interesting dispute about this practice. It is worth considering for a few moments.

The Laying on of Hands

In the 17th century, there was a lively debate and, in fact, a quite intense division amongst British Baptists about the practice of laying hands upon all those who were baptised. Barrie White's study, The English Baptists of

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3 The argument sketched here has been published in my essay entitled, "Future Church - a Crisis in Baptism?", in Ken Manley (ed), Future Church: A Baptist Discussion (Hawthorn, Victoria: Baptist Union of Victoria, 1996), pp. 81-91.

4 Here it is worth noting that Jesus is the chosen one, affirmed as such in the baptismal narratives. So, too, 1 Peter 2. 8 speaks of Christians as a chosen people. This element is not considered in our later discussion of a holy nation and royal priesthood, but would need to be considered in a more comprehensive study. The difficulties of the exclusive and possible suppressionist implications of this idea need to be addressed. In the context of the baptismal narratives, the stress of the expression seems to be more on the situation of the chosen one as beloved, nourished and held precious to God, rather than any implications of preference over or exclusion of others.