

Key Documents: **‘I dwell among mine own people’: Allan Webb Calls for a Strong Sense of Baptist Identity**

INTRODUCTION

A measure of the growing move towards establishing a colony-wide Baptist Union in New Zealand is the publication of a seminal sermon by the Australian master-organiser, A.W. Webb (1839-1902). Webb had received his training in Adelaide under the early Baptist leader Silas Mead. From 1877-81 he was Pastor of the Auckland Baptist Church and he was present at the foundation of the New Zealand Baptist Union in 1880, before returning to Australia for a further series of pastorates.

Webb was a conservative Baptist who favoured the creedal approach of the Baptists in Victoria and was suspicious of the merging ‘higher criticism’. He thus shared Charles Spurgeon’s concerns over the ‘downgrade’ in British Baptist theology. This sermon, as the editorial note indicates, was preached twice in Sydney in 1876. In his history of Australian Baptist life, Ken Manley notes its popularity and analyses its fairly narrow definitions with a later, South Australian statement by John Paynter.¹

The significance of the sermon for New Zealand lies in its being reprinted four years after its first delivery, just as *The Baptist* magazine was advocating a more denominational line (see previous article) and when decisions about colony organisation were soon to be made. The sermon is addressed primarily to scattered Baptists worshipping in other denominations. There were many of these in New Zealand at a time when communication and travel was still difficult. The sermon thus demonstrates the challenges of colonial life for small denominations. It also exemplifies a strand of Baptist ecclesiology which came to dominate Baptist life in New Zealand and which overwhelmed the more regional focus, found particularly in Canterbury in the 1870s and 80s.

¹ K.R. Manley *From Woolloomooloo to ‘Eternity’: A History of Australian Baptists, Vol. 1: Growing an Australian Church (1831-1914)* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 225-7.

**The Baptists:
Their Denominational Existence
a Necessity.
A word to the Baptists scattered in
other denominations.***

A sermon by the Rev. A. W. WEBB, Pastor of the Baptist Church, Auckland.

* Note. Preached in the Baptist Church, Harris Street, Sydney, on Sunday evening, August 5th, 1876, and repeated Sunday evening, August, 19th, 1876, and now published by request.

‘And exhort you that ye should contend earnestly for the faith
once delivered to the saints.’—Jude 3.

The particular occasion of this exhortation was the manifestation in the church of a desperate declension from the truth. Those fundamental doctrines of our holy faith, the Deity and Sovereignty of the Lord Jesus were being denied. The grace of the gospel was made an apology for renouncing its pure morality: ‘Turning the grace of God into lasciviousness, denying the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.’

But whilst this was the immediate occasion of this exhortation, the principle which it enjoins is one of world-wide and perpetual application.

There are distinctions in the relative importance of the various portions of revealed truth; some doctrines are of more moment than others, as in the bodily structure, the functions of some organs are vital as contrasted with others which are simply useful. Yet who will be disposed to neglect a crushed and sloughing finger on the plea that it is not the heart, or to treat with indifference a broken leg because the skull remains unfractured? True, the doctrines of the Deity of Christ, the atonement, the need of conversion, are of paramount importance, and yet no one who believes that every iota of revealed truth was given by God, and ‘is profitable,’ will say that we are warranted in regarding any part with indifference. If such part of

truth is not essential to salvation, it was deemed by the Author of Salvation as of sufficient importance to be recorded, that we may know the things which are essential to obedience, and which please Him. It is on this ground that we deem the question of Baptism of sufficient gravity to engage our attention, and to form the subject of religious controversy. I would here guard my hearers from being 'thrown off the scent' by a cry very often raised by those who regard our testimony and existence with disfavour; the cry I refer to is 'O, is all this fuss about a little water, a question of mere quantities, what can water do for us?' No, my friends, the fuss is not about water; there lie at the very basis of our witness these fundamental questions, 'Is Christ to be the legislator in His Church or not? Is the disciple of Jesus to choose or to obey?' It is not a question of water, little or much, but of simple obedience to the revealed will of our Master. It is the important question whether the religion of the New Testament is a personal matter or one of proxy - of whether ordinances are independent or not of the faith of those participating in them, for their beneficial effects.

There are many subjects about which I believe a wise latitude is observable in the scriptures; matters to be decided by circumstances, fitness, and even taste. Amongst questions resolvable by circumstances I should even place the method of governing the church; I think I could, without any sacrifice of principle, exercise my ministry in connexion with a Presbytery or even under a Bishop if he were wise and good. Amongst questions of preference I should place such as that of the propriety of wearing a peculiar garb, white or black, or even purple, so long as these dresses are not regarded as symbolic; for it is not what the man wears, but what he preaches, that is of importance. Or, again, that of having a liturgical service (a hymn-book is liturgical) or free prayer. Not that I am dissatisfied with the methods we have in vogue. Our order of government works very well, and I have no desire to don a gown, or use a prayer book, preferring things as they are. But these are matters about which but little is said of a positive character, and on account of which it is a pity that divisions should be occasioned. But Baptism is a positive institution of Christ; to treat that with indifference is an insult to our Master. And as nothing which is brought into His presence and determined by a reference to His will - nothing about which the conscience is exercised as in His sight - is trifling. We refuse to regard this as a matter about which we make too much noise, but believing it to be a part of the faith once delivered to the saints, we conceive it to be our solemn duty to contend with earnestness for it, and the more

particularly as we see how inevitably infant-sprinkling tends to foster the growing ritualism of the age, lying as it does at the very base of sacramentarian views. In pursuance of my object, which is to show the absolute necessity for our existence as a Christian body, for bearing witness on this subject, as a part of that religious system once delivered to the saints, I shall

1. Insist that there is a faith on this subject which was once for all ('hapax') delivered to the saints.

If 'once for all,' this religious system is incapable of alteration, of growth, of evolution. We do not believe in the evolution of dogma. The truth of revelation, lying as it does in the first instance, beyond the reach of human reason, is to be received as imparted, and of all other truths this is more emphatically true of the ordinances of Christ, resting as they do solely on the authority of Christ. If 'once for all delivered to the saints,' where is the truth to be found? In that record, we reply, which contains the faith of the apostolic age, the age of inspiration and infallibility. The moment we leave that region we become sensible of the fact that we are dealing with a totally different class of teaching. If we are tempted to reach down the musty tomes of patristic literature, or the writings of the schoolmen, or even the creeds and confessions of Christendom, we find ourselves enveloped in fog. The age immediately succeeding the apostolic (the age which some vaunt of as the purest) gives evidence of a tendency (unconscious to those living in it) to the development of those principles which have ripened into the huge apostacy of Rome, and simultaneously with, and as noiselessly as, the introduction of monachism, martyr-worship, and transubstantiation comes in infant-baptism. In seeking for the faith, 'once for all' delivered to the saints, we are never safe outside the limits of our Bibles. To the word and testimony for that faith. Our infallible guide is the Bible. 'Ah, then,' as said a Free-thinker to me not long ago, 'Ah, then, your Bible is your Pope.' 'Exactly so,' I replied, 'You have most accurately defined my position; for, with all the unwavering submissiveness which characterises the Papist when listening to the ex-cathedra utterances of the Pope, I listen to whatever the Bible teaches.' Yes, brethren, in defiance of those who would exalt either ecclesiastical authority or human reason to the position of unerring arbiter in matters of religious belief, we will abide by the Word of God, not 'one jot or tittle' of which can fail. It would be beside my purpose to enter into the baptismal controversy here, and I am only defining the limits of

appeal as being that book which, by direct command and by numberless incidental allusions, clearly lays down the two principles which we maintain, that Believers only are the subjects for both ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and that the apostolic mode of administering baptism is by immersion. If we would know God's mind we must not refer to third century Fathers, who had no other light than we have, and who were, as just emerging from heathenism, and poisoned with gnosticism, in a position inferior to ours for judging the simple meaning of the inspired records.

2. My second point is that the faith, once for all delivered to the Saints, is discoverable by them now.

In this age of diversified religious opinion, when men, to all appearance equally learned, equally pious, and equally sincere, are teaching doctrines so diametrically opposed to each other, it is not surprising that the humble and perplexed Christian should cry out with Pilate, 'What is truth?' 'Is it possible for an unlettered man, an illiterate woman like me, to discover it?' And thereupon we are tempted to say (and it is a convenient way of disposing of the toil and responsibility of ascertaining personally what our Lord's will is), 'Well, I will go on as my fathers went before me. I will listen to the instructions of my good old Church and of my minister with implicit confidence, and hope that after all mine is the right way, or likely to be as good as my neighbour's.'

Now, a Saint's faith, enshrined in the written Word for his acceptance, ought to be discoverable to him as a Saint. Without the intervention of Doctors of Divinity - without even Greek or Hebrew - useful though such auxiliary knowledge is - he ought to be able from God's Word to determine what is God's will; and I believe that if men would only cast aside their prejudices, their prepossessions, their unwarrantable reverence for custom, and their superstitious deference to human teachers, who after all, should be subject to the same Word, if they would teach aright, they may, unlearned as they are, come to see the truth, and be perfectly assured of it, in this matter of Baptism.

I well remember how my mind was infected with prejudice when first I was drawn to investigate this matter. One thing I thought, it was that the Baptists were not the warm and energetic Christians I should like to associate with, imagining, perhaps, as some stupid people have done in this city, that the water exercised a

lowering influence on their zeal;* and another thing, I did not think but I knew, that identification with them meant the surrendering of many pleasant associations, and the forfeiture of many happy prospects; and so, for four months, with a variety of polemical works on either side of the controversy under perusal, I oscillated from one side to another, sometimes thinking I must be convinced, then hoping I might not be, and then anon imagining I had escaped from the Baptist snare altogether, until at length I determined to end this controversy. In the presence of God, and on my knees, with my Bible before me, I took a sheet of paper, on which I inscribed at the head of two columns respectively, 'for Believers' Baptism' 'for Infant Baptism.' I then wrote down every text in the New Testament bearing on the subject, and I need hardly tell you that I terminated that investigation in a different mood to that in which I commenced it—I found myself in the clear light of truth. The mists had been scattered, the dust of the contending combatants had been laid. I had learnt God's will from God's own Book; and I determined to be baptized, thereby repudiating the well-intentioned mistake of my excellent parents. The next morning I went to my respected minister, who had been a witness of the conflict, and said, 'I am going to be baptized,' which confession elicited no remonstrance, for he knew enough of me to know that it had been well and properly considered. I am persuaded that if men, learned and unlearned, would, without prejudice or reference to other authorities, consult the best book ever written on the 'Baptist Controversy,' which may be purchased at the Bible Hall for threepence—viz., the New Testament—they would be able to say with me, 'On this matter of baptism I am sure I hold the faith once for all delivered to the saints.' An assured conviction is possible to the patient, single-minded student of the Word of God; to him who is content to be as a little child in God's kingdom.

3. My third point is, that when discovered, it is our duty to contend earnestly for this point of the faith.

The zeal with which we contend for the various items of the faith should be, it is true, proportioned to their relative importance; and our feelings in contending for baptism with our Paedo-baptist brethren are necessarily less intense than they would be when

* This was an erroneous impression indeed. I have since noticed that in all such unsectarian work as involves no compromise of principles, there are no more ardent workers than the Baptists

contending with the Socinian, who, entering the Holy of Holies with ruthless and impious touch, lays his hand upon the ark of the Covenant, and denies the Godhead of our Lord; and yet *no* part of truth, when attacked or rejected, can fail to excite the concern of the loyal disciple of his Lord. And as a straw shows the course of a current as surely as a war frigate would, so our conduct in relation to the minor truths of revelation may with accuracy determine the true state of our wills and affections towards Christ. 'He that is faithful in that which is least is unfaithful² in that which is greater.' And further, as the whole faith is to be a subject of valorous defence on the part of those who hold it, we shall not mistake our vocation as Baptists in seeing ourselves set for the defence in particular of that part of it which has to do with the Scripture doctrine of the Sacraments, and particularly of baptism—its mode and subjects.

The original word, 'epagonizesthai,' has embedded in it an idea which, I fear, we all fail to realise contention for the truth. Our translators have fairly rendered it as being *earnest* contention—an agony, a fight, in which the stake is not merely victory, but some great issue;—the slavery, or enfranchisement of a race—as men tight for their liberties, their children, their homes. As men should contend, who feel that God's glory and the welfare of immortal spirits is the stake. 'We have, brethren, to bear, as Baptists, an immense amount of insult, of obloquy, of indifference, and what-not, for our persistent advocacy of our principles. We are esteemed the troublers of Israel, and we are the butt of the whole confederacy of the multiform and divergent opinions which are held by Paedobaptists upon this matter; for I need hardly say that Paedo-baptists differ almost as much amongst themselves as they all do with us. But I avow my conviction that, if we were half as much in earnest as we ought to be in this matter, we should make ourselves 'viler still.' And if the spirit that has animated our martyred Baptist forefathers—martyred by Papist and Protestant—in the past animated us, we should have to endure a moral pillory and roasting often or than we do. And if, in fulfilment of our convictions we must come into collision with others whose Christian principles on other points we admire, and bear their reproaches, remember it is for Christ's sake; and with Luther we must say, 'Here stand I must, and God help me.' Now, in these three propositions I find our apology, or justification I should say, for our continued and separate existence.

² 'Unfaithful' is what appears as printed in the *NZ Baptist*. The context suggests 'faithful' is what is intended.

If there is no definite and perfected faith in the Bible; or if that faith is in such a nebulous form that we cannot come to a conclusion upon it without the intervention of an infallible teacher, or if when discovered we may treat our conclusions as matters of no importance, and choose whether we will contend for them or not as suits our comfort and convenience, or the comfort and convenience of others, if either of these negative propositions be true, then I cannot justify our existence. We are schismatics from the larger bodies of Christendom, and no mere fancy or preference of our own can justify it. But if what I have advanced be true, then I affirm that we cannot but continue to exist and push our way with all the vigour which a devout conscientiousness demands, and for these reasons:

1. *First—Because in other denominations another faith is not only tolerated but enjoined.*

The Independents, who are our nearest of kin ecclesiastically, have taken care to embody in all their trust deeds (at all events in this colony) the dogma of infant baptism; they believe that baptism is effected by sprinkling, and that children are by it dedicated to God. The Presbyterian believes that the children of the believing parent 'are Christians, and federally holy, and therefore are they baptised,' that is sprinkled.

The Church of England, whilst making dipping the rule, makes sprinkling optional, and so it has become the rule, and they make baptism not only available for infants, but insist upon it as a pressing duty. Moreover, they assert unequivocally that after baptism the child, just before pronounced unregenerate, thereupon regenerate, and ever after he is taught to regard baptism as the occasion of his being 'made a *member of Christ*, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.'

The Wesleyans are authorized to use the liturgy of the Church of England in baptism, and if the Rev. Richard Watson may be allowed to speak as an authorized teacher of that body: — 'It conveys the present blessing of Christ, which blessing cannot be nominal, but must be substantial and efficacious. It secures also the gift of the Holy Spirit in those secret spiritual influences which are a seed of life.'

Now in each of these communions a definite belief is laid down, which all ministers are *obliged* to accept, and which private members are *supposed* to accept. Under any circumstances, identification with these bodies is a tacit admission that I accept their

teaching upon this particular item of Christian faith and practice. If I say I am Independent, Churchman, Wesleyan, or Presbyterian, I am understood to accept their views on baptism, and if occupying any post of usefulness as a teacher of others, I am expected to teach them. Where then, as affording consistent standing ground, can I assemble if there be not a Baptist Church?

2. In the second place, we must continue to exist because identification with these Churches is under compromise.

If I am identified with them I must be content to be silent upon a point of God's will, which I esteem to be clearly revealed. If you say 'No,' then why are ministers holding Baptist sentiments, in every other sense orthodox and efficient, excluded from these bodies, except as they are content to be silent on this matter.

If you say 'No,' then try what will result from your becoming thoroughly faithful to your convictions on this matter. Do not forget that if your convictions are true they are very valuable - that to you belongs the important work of restoring to the Church the primitive doctrine on baptism - a doctrine which will deal a deathblow to Romanism and Ritualism - a doctrine likely to be of growing value to the Church in her conflict with these misconceptions of the Christian system - a doctrine full of evangelical truth and divine beauty. Begin then, my Baptist brother (so long in silence, witnessing what you believe to be unscriptural without protest), begin to bear your testimony, contend earnestly, circulate some tracts upon the Baptist controversy amongst your fellow-believers; instruct them more perfectly in the way of God, and see how soon the door will be shown you, and unless you are content to abide in silence, you must find another spiritual home. You will assuredly be 'turned out of the synagogue.'

3. In the third place; I insist upon the necessity of our denominational existence because if we are all content to go away into other bodies, our testimony ceases upon this point. And shall it? Shall we be traitors to Christ's truth instead of valiant soldiers for it? No! brethren, no! I would exhort those of our brethren, scattered in various Paedo-baptist churches to rally. It is cowardly to leave us alone in the battle. You say, in apology, you are 'so useful' in your present position. And who is the best judge of usefulness? May you not, in judging before the time, be passing a wrong estimate on the result of your life-work. And granted that you

are useful, is there no need for your talents with your own people? I imagine no Baptist Church would fail to appreciate your usefulness as one of the elements they most need, but which you are giving to others. You say you are 'so comfortable in your present position.' And was it to comfort Christ called you, or to a cross? You are 'so comfortable' supporting a ministry, one of whose functions you utterly repudiate, whilst your ministers, who faithfully represent your convictions are toiling away with insufficient support, and the people taxed heavily to afford such sustenance as they do. You are 'so comfortable,' assisting in spreading error, whilst the Church you once aided is left to do her aggressive work as best she can. You are 'so comfortable,' and for all you seem to care, the body which most adequately represents, according to your own convictions, the truth of Christ, may be toiling with a cross on her shoulders heavy to be borne, which you will not touch with one of your fingers. Remember, my brother, so snugly ensconced in that larger and wealthier Church—basking in the smiles of influence and ease—remember, those who are ashamed of Christ and of His Word, of them will He be ashamed when He comes in His Glory. Remember that, 'Whosoever shall break one of these least commandments, and teach men so, he shall be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whosoever shall do, and teach them, the same should be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.'

In a word, baptized Christian, if you believe that you can 'contend earnestly for the faith' where you are, remain and do so, but suffer no compromise to be the cost of your separation from your brethren. If to be where you are means guilty silence, then come out on such a platform as will admit of the freest expression of your conviction.

We affirm, in the existing state of affairs, our denominational existence is a *present* absolute necessity; let us hope not a *future* one. Let us hope that ere long the necessity for our existence will cease in the wise adoption by the Reformed Churches of the Scriptural doctrine of baptism. There does seem to be a widespread tendency in several bodies to allow the baptism of infants to fall into disuse as an unmeaning and, therefore, if on no other grounds, an unscriptural thing. And if this happy result is not so speedily attained, let us hope that, at least, the article of infant baptism will be removed from creeds and trust-deeds of all the Churches, leaving the fullest latitude to the individual Christian, whether minister or not, to teach, discuss, and practice, that which in God's sight, he believes to be true.

Meantime our duty as Baptists is clear. If we are conscientiously determined to bear without reserve or compromise our testimony, and to contend earnestly for that view of baptism which we conceive to be alone consistent with an evangelical faith, we must find our home among Baptists.

If our people are obliged in sparsely-populated districts to join other communions as a temporary expedient, it must be as Baptists; and if silence on the subject is the cost of such privilege, then better form a small Church, and in witnessing for the truth wait the time, when their principles having won adherents, they shall have the advantage which, whilst not essential to the existence of a Church, is a privilege a Church should desire—a pastor of their own—with the various agencies of a perfectly-organised Church.

Our existence is a necessity. Thrust out of other communions by tests obnoxious to us, prevented from bearing our testimony, or fulfilling our convictions therein, we naturally flock together, and form Churches of those who accord in principle. What otherwise should we do, turned out into the cold for our principles? If it were a matter of mere preference, or of something which could be talked of as of degrees - better or best - as in the question of government and administration, we might well afford to relegate such things to the region of questions debatable, but quite insufficient to divide the Church of Christ; but it is a matter with us of right or wrong - of loyalty or otherwise to our Master; and until the Church at large either accepts our principles as scriptural, or, at all events allows absolute personal freedom to ministers and people on the point, we have no choice but to remain as a distinct body, and realising whilst doing so that above all other Christian Churches, we have the most complete justification for our continued separation.

To every inducement to compromise—to absorption into other denominations, to identification with other churches, the utterance persistently and uniformly of the Baptist must be that of the Shunamite woman – ‘I dwell among mine own people.’

I should be very sorry that any unconverted person should leave this audience to-night, saying. ‘I went to the Baptist Church, but whilst a great deal was said about contending for believers' baptism, not a word was addressed to the unsaved.’ Let me then say, that whilst baptism is a matter which more immediately concerns the believer, there are many particulars of ‘the faith once for all delivered to the Saints’ which are of vital importance to you as a sinner. Amongst these I shall briefly insist on three. The first is the value of

the soul - *your* soul. Its capabilities are such as God alone can estimate. It can either love Him, and serve Him for ever, or it can endure the inconceivable woe connected with eternal exclusion from His immediate presence. The worth of the soul is not calculated in the currency of earth. Its redemption is, indeed, costly, being secured not by silver or gold, but by the precious blood of Jesus. Think of the priceless jewel you possess, and fear lest it be lost for ever.

The next fact I would insist upon is - that your soul is in instant peril of eternal ruin. Nothing stands between you and that ruin but the long-suffering of God. If that were to fail eternal justice might say, 'This night thy soul shall be required of thee.' 'The day of salvation is now. To-morrow you may have heard the gates of eternity close behind you, shutting out for ever a mercy now possible to you.

And last and best of all Jesus Christ, the only one by whom you can be saved, 'for there is no other name given under Heaven among men' to this end—is waiting to be gracious *to you*. He can 'save to the uttermost;' and He will 'in no wise cast you out.' Some have, ignorantly or wickedly, said that we esteem the water of baptism as possessing saving efficacy. But no; let it be known once and for ever, that we know of but one cleansing fount - the blood of Jesus - which washes away all sin from the defiled conscience. We know of but one sure ground of hope before God - the perfect work of the Lord Jesus. Nothing need be, nothing can be, added to that. Come then, unsaved sinner, to Christ first, and know His power to save; and then, as a happy believer, 'Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,' confess Him, in His own expressive ordinance of Believer's Baptism.
