

William Potter (1836-1908) at South Melbourne Baptist Church (1863-1875): Questions of Principle, Propriety, Property and Prosperity

ABSTRACT

South Melbourne or Emerald Hill Baptist Church was formed in 1854 at a critical time in the development of the colony of Victoria. After William Potter became pastor in 1863 there was immediate tension, notably between Potter and the founding deacon, William Ferguson. The schism at Emerald Hill in 1865 and the subsequent actions of Potter raised several significant issues for Baptists. The church had been granted a land site by the colonial government even though traditional Baptist polity emphasised voluntarism and was opposed to all forms of State Aid. When State Aid was abolished in 1870 the churches could sell their lands. Potter and his trustees sold the land and most of the money was paid to Potter who insisted that he had not been paid a salary as pastor for many years. This sparked a public controversy in which not only the Baptist Association of Victoria but also the secular press attacked Potter for his actions which he maintained were entirely legal. This sad schism raised several issues for Baptist polity. Could State Aid be justified in any circumstances? How should disputes be settled within a church? What is the role of the pastor, the deacons and the church meeting? What is the function of a wider associational body when the local church refuses to take advice? How should a denomination discipline a pastor whose actions though legal are thought to be immoral?

Another sad story about a bitter schism in a small Baptist church would scarcely seem appealing, but this tale from colonial Victoria raises several tensions about significant principles at the heart of Baptist belief and practice as well as introducing a colourful and

influential character whose career seems to have been unnoticed by Baptist historians.

South Melbourne is, as its name implies, to the south of and immediately across the Yarra River from the Victorian metropolis. The land parish of South Melbourne was proclaimed on 23 March 1840. The area later designated as the City of South Melbourne centred on a grassy and tree-lined hill about half way across the four-kilometre expanse between the Yarra and Hobson's Bay, a cove at the northern end of Port Phillip. This rise was called Emerald Hill from 1845 and was the first suburb to be defined in Victoria in 1854: it was renamed South Melbourne in 1883.¹ South Melbourne developed into one of the city's first industrial suburbs and later underwent a shift from manufacturing to commercial industry after the Second World War and now is a centre of inner city heritage conservation and urban renewal.

The first Baptist church in Melbourne at Collins Street had been founded in 1843 and only a handful of other churches had been established when Emerald Hill Baptists began to meet in the home of William Neale early in 1854.² These were exciting days in Victoria. The discovery of gold in 1851 had brought large numbers of immigrants. By the end of 1854 more than 140,000 had arrived from Britain, another 20,000 from China and other foreign ports and nearly 110,000 from other parts of Australia. The resulting gold-rush inflation was more severe than any later inflation in the nation's history.³ Squatters camped in South Melbourne when they arrived in the fevered days of the Gold Rush and this Canvas Town became a focus for evangelical mission by pioneer Baptists of Melbourne.⁴ By June 1854 the Baptists of Emerald Hill gathered in Mr Bilsborough's small house in York Street which was renovated to facilitate a meeting place.⁵ Land was then leased at another site in York Street

¹ See S. Priestley, *South Melbourne. A History* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1995).

² Details for the early years of South Melbourne are widely scattered but where specific details are cited references are provided. For Neale, see F.J. Wilkin, *Baptists in Victoria* (Melbourne: Baptist Union of Victoria, 1939), 46.

³ G. Blainey, *Our Side of the Country. The Story of Victoria* (North Ryde: Methuen Haynes, 1984), 40.

⁴ K.R. Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to 'Eternity': A History of Australian Baptists* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 59-60.

⁵ C. Daley, *The History of South Melbourne from the Foundation of Settlement at Port Phillip to the Year 1935* (Melbourne: Robertson & Mullins, 1940), 178.

and a simple wooden chapel opened for worship services on 12 November 1854. A church was formed on 20 November with nine members, including William Ferguson who had been a member of a Baptist church in Stirling, Scotland. No official records of the church survive from this period and, apart from a few denominational reports, the main sources for the earliest days are two pamphlets written by opponents during the tensions of 1873-74 – Ferguson and William Potter who became pastor in 1863.⁶

The first pastor was Revd J. Lindsay who supplied the infant church for some months in 1854 and was one of the foundation members.⁷ According to Ferguson, the church was unable to support Lindsay who continued to preach for the church when he was free. Potter claimed that there had been a dispute, that this had led to a decline in numbers and that Lindsay had been summarily dismissed. This charge must be seen as a part of Potter's argument that Ferguson had always been a troublemaker in the church. Ferguson vigorously denied this particular allegation. Potter also claimed that because of the dispute the Baptists nearly lost the York Street chapel as they had a debt of £150. Ferguson replied that when Lindsay was asked to conclude his ministry only four members were still living on the Hill but John Collins, a generous Collins Street Baptist, purchased the chapel although the church now owed Collins for this amount. Ferguson, with a lawyer's precision, quoted Church minutes, includes testimonies from former members and Collins declared that Potter's version was 'false and unfounded'.⁸

Problems of pastoral leadership were almost overwhelming for the small suburban churches of the colony as they were for the two city churches at Collins Street and Albert Street (which had resulted from a division in Collins Street in 1850). Lay preachers kept

⁶ *The Rev W.M. Potter's Reply to the statements made on the 27th September 1873 in the "Age" Newspaper; with which is incorporated the history of the Baptist denomination on Emerald Hill, from the year 1854* (Emerald Hill, 1873); *Mr. W. Ferguson's Reply to the Statements made by Mr. W. Potter in a pamphlet, in which he endeavours to defend his conduct in selling a portion of the Baptist Church Land, Howe Crescent, Emerald Hill, and in mortgaging the Remainder* (Emerald Hill, 1874).

⁷ This may well have been Revd John Welpy Lindsay (1804-69) who served mainly in Tasmania from 1850 but according to family tradition was in Melbourne at about this time: L. Rowston, *Baptists in Van Diemen's Land* (Launceston: Baptist Union of Tasmania, 1985), 64-65; letter from Mr Rowston, 8 February 2007.

⁸ *Potter's Reply*, 9-10; *Ferguson's Reply*, 7-14.

the work going at Emerald Hill during 1855 then 'Mr Sharp' led from December 1855 until March 1857 when he left to commence a boarding school in Brighton. Another lay preacher W.J. Clarke served the church for a few months after which William Gardiner Sprigg (1832-1926) voluntarily supplied the church from October 1857 until December 1861. Potter conceded that Sprigg was 'an educated man and a excellent preacher'.⁹ He was the son of English Baptist pastor Revd J. Sprigg whose family was to play a significant role in colonial affairs.¹⁰ Sprigg proved an able (lay) pastor at Emerald Hill and during 1860 the first baptisms in the church were held when seven were baptised by James Taylor, pastor of Collins Street.¹¹

When Sprigg resolved to visit England, Emerald Hill had to look for another pastor and John Crosby, a young minister - aged 24 - who arrived from England in December 1861 but whose background remains elusive, was immediately appointed. There were further baptismal services during 1862 but Crosby had come to the colony in poor health and his ministry was terminated by his death on 15 December 1862.¹² Potter claimed that Ferguson and his 'clique' had treated Crosby badly and sought to have his ministry terminated but again Ferguson cited several witnesses who vigorously rejected Potter's allegation.¹³ Crosby, however, had taken one initiative which was to be central to the later controversy. He had successfully applied to the government for a temporary reservation of land at Howe Crescent and had begun a fund to build a chapel on the site. The church purchased the shell of what had been a United Presbyterian Church building in Clarendon Street and this was placed on the reserve, refitted and opened as a Baptist Church in June 1863. The old property at York Street was retained for a schoolroom and other

⁹ *Potter's Reply*, 9.

¹⁰ W.G. Sprigg's brother was Sir J. Gordon Sprigg who became the Premier of Cape Colony and he himself was Secretary of the Melbourne Tramway Company. Although he was financially ruined by the dramatic economic slump that afflicted Melbourne in 1892 he recovered and died a wealthy man. His nephew W. Gordon Sprigg (1866-1962), whose father had been the curator of the Melbourne Zoo, was active in the Collins Street Church and a leader in several evangelical endeavours including the YMCA and the Temperance Alliance. Obituary for W.G. Sprigg in *Australian Baptist*, 27 July 1926, 3. For his financial troubles, see M. Cannon, *The Land Boomers* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1967), 45.

¹¹ *Australian Evangelist*, 1860: 8, 57, 167; 1861: 176.

¹² *Australian Evangelist*, 1862: 136, 154, 340, 388.

¹³ *Potter's Reply*, 10; *Ferguson's Reply*, 11-14.

church purposes.¹⁴ This development raises the first principle in dispute among Baptists: was it right to receive State Aid in the form of a land grant? There is no evidence that at the time there were any tensions within the congregation over this issue although, as will be discussed, other Baptists in the colony were already bitterly divided over this question.

William Potter preached for the church on 27 December 1862 and began as pastor on 8 February 1863; he was pastor when the Howe Crescent chapel was opened. With his advent the two major protagonists of the dissension in South Melbourne were in place: founding member and deacon William Ferguson and his pastor, Revd William Potter.

Potter was only 26 years old and had very little experience of Baptist churches.¹⁵ He had been born into a farming family in Darlington, County Durham, on 13 April 1836 and as a young boy came with his family to Hobart in 1839. Here he was eventually apprenticed as a compositor, worked for a few months in 1852-53 on the Bendigo goldfields and then was employed back in Tasmania in the printing trade. In 1856 he began to study law having been encouraged by a resolution of his Congregational church that he should study for the ministry. Revd John Martin Strongman, who had come to South Australia with the support of the (Congregationalist) Colonial Missionary Society in 1848 and became headmaster of the Hobart Town High School in 1851, tutored young Potter.¹⁶ When Strongman accepted the pastorate of the Ballarat (Victoria) Congregational Church in 1857 Potter moved with him but as Strongman stayed in Ballarat only a year Potter then transferred to Melbourne and studied at the Carlton College (Congregationalist) and at the University of Melbourne where he completed seven subjects in one year. He was then appointed as pastor and was ordained in 1859 at the Mount Clear Union Church (Baptist and Congregationalist) near Ballarat on the road to Buninyong. He also conducted a small

¹⁴ *Australian Evangelist*, 1863: 200.

¹⁵ The most useful biography of Potter from which the following details are taken is *Cyclopaedia of Victoria* (Melbourne: Cyclopaedia Company, 3 vols, 1903-05), vol 2, 40-42.

¹⁶ For Strongman, see G.L. Lockley (ed. B Upham), *Congregationalism in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 2001), 169-71, 194, 197, 289, 293.

day school in the church building.¹⁷ From Mount Clear Potter came to Emerald Hill. His background was largely Congregationalist although (presumably) he had adopted Baptist views to be acceptable to his new church. Potter was also active in journalism and had been editor of the *South Melbourne Standard* from 1862.

Meanwhile, the other Baptist churches in Victoria had formed an association in 1858. This lapsed in 1861 but a fresh start was made in 1862 and by the end of that year some 16 churches with 1,456 members were affiliated with the new Baptist Association of Victoria. These included the Union church at Mount Clear and Emerald Hill.¹⁸ Potter was welcomed as a minister by the other churches and their pastors and was often present at Association meetings.

Troubles within the South Melbourne Church escalated in the months and years that followed. For the earliest tensions our main sources are the pamphlets published by the two opponents when a later and more substantial issue became a matter of public notoriety and featured prominently in the secular press. In brief, tensions over Potter's ministry resulted in a schism in 1865 and then two rival Baptist churches existed on Emerald Hill. The colonial government resolved in 1870 to cease all further grants to churches, and all lands that had already been given became the property of the receiving churches and could be disposed of if so wished.¹⁹ Potter and the trustees of his church then sold the property and Potter received the bulk of this as he claimed he had not been paid for many years as pastor of the church. Potter and then some time later Ferguson published their accounts of this development and included their differing accounts of the church's history prior to this scandal. Ferguson made use of church records and included numerous letters and statements from former and present members in order to support his version of events which, it must be judged, is the more convincing narrative.

Several issues were raised by the unhappy saga which makes the story of continuing interest. At the heart of wider Baptist concern

¹⁷ Information about Mount Clear kindly supplied by Mr Robert Ashley of Ballarat (email of 21 February 2007) who has a manuscript copy of original reminiscences which detail the beginnings of this work (which was only short lived) and of Potter's ministry there.

¹⁸ B.S. Brown, *Members One of Another* (Melbourne: Baptist Union of Victoria, 1962), 21-36.

¹⁹ See J.S. Gregory, *Church and State* (Melbourne: Cassell Australia, 1973), 103-46.

was the question of differences about State Aid to religion and the South Melbourne land grant was received at precisely the time that the Baptist Association was maintaining a vigorous opposition to such grants. A second principle was a matter of ecclesiology: how should disputes be resolved within a local church? What is the role of the pastor and that of the church meeting? A third issue was the function of the Baptist Association in assisting in such crises. What authority, if any, does it have to resolve such tensions? Then, of course, there was the morality of a pastor receiving the proceeds of a state grant as personal income. Thus questions of principle, propriety and disputes over property were all mingled and the sad results for a church's prosperity when it is involved in such public disputes cannot be minimised.

Tracking the unfortunate developments is complicated but clearly several in the Church quickly reacted against Potter. Ferguson may well have reflected a typical Scotch Baptist suspicion of paid clergy and had a strong belief in the authority of church elders or leaders. Potter was a young man full of confidence and assertive of ministerial authority. At first all went well. The church successfully applied for permanent title of the land and both Potter and Ferguson were listed as trustees, so both supported this procedure. The opening on 21 June 1863 of the new 200-seat chapel at the rather splendid Howe Crescent half-acre site was an encouragement to the congregation and the fledgling denomination. Preachers at the celebration were the Association President, Revd Isaac New of Albert Street, and Revd David Rees an energetic Association activist. A successful bazaar was held later in the year and this raised some £260 which cleared the debt of £180 and helped fund building costs. Among the donors was Henry Hopkins, a well-known philanthropist of Tasmania, and this obviously reflected Potter's connections.²⁰

Not all Baptists approved of raising funds by holding bazaars and preferred freewill offerings for all church work. Although bazaars or sales of work were not uncommon among Baptists this Emerald Hill bazaar illustrates the kind of personal arguments that could be evoked. Whilst this began as a petty 'parish-pump' dispute it revealed deep-rooted tensions and differing views of the role of a minister and the deacons. Potter's judgment was that Ferguson as a senior deacon was always a troublemaker and that his 'love of power in the church was fatal to its continuance and prosperity'. Such power brokers in a congregation are not unknown in Baptist churches, it must be

²⁰ *Australian Evangelist*, 1863: 200, 300.

conceded, but Ferguson listed several tributes which affirmed, as one friend insisted, he had been ‘the main stay (under God) of the little church ... and an ornament to Christian society’. Potter had formed the view that Ferguson and the deacons ‘wished to make the pastorate a mere appanage of the Diaconate’. The bazaar dispute ignited these differing perceptions. At a meeting of the stallholders, according to Potter, the place of honour was unanimously assigned to the pastor’s wife and her ‘coadjutor’ who happened to be ‘one of the wealthiest ladies in the church’. Ferguson was absent at the meeting and called another meeting which proposed ‘to openly insult’ these ladies by altering the position of their stall. The reasons given were: (1) that the church was ‘a thoroughly democratic institution’ in which all were on a common level and no precedent should be given ‘to either social status or wealth’; (2) the bazaar had originated with the Sunday School and that the place of honour should go to the Teachers’ stall. The other deacons agreed but the Superintendent of the Sunday School, a solicitor ‘and consequently a gentleman’, insisted that if this was done he could not remain a member of the church – perhaps the wealthy lady was his wife? Potter drew a moral from this little saga: ‘As far as he was able to judge, the bane of the Baptist Church on Emerald Hill was its ultra democracy. It never had treated its ministers with proper respect, and its little weight in the community was not to be wondered at’. This episode led the deacons to determine on Potter’s removal, he believed. Ferguson dismissed the whole bazaar story as ‘much ado about nothing’ and the central issue was solely about Potter wanting his wife to have the main stall.²¹

So life was far from pleasant in the little congregation. Ferguson claimed that it was soon obvious after Potter’s arrival that he was not qualified ‘either by nature or grace’ to be a minister of the gospel and evidences of disquiet were reported to the deacons.²² Relationships rapidly deteriorated even more. Potter resented what he called Ferguson’s *modus operandi*: with his ‘so solemn and pious demeanour’ at the prayer meetings he would appear to be ‘most fervent in petitioning for *more success* to follow the pastor’s labours’ and then bemoan the lack of zeal displayed in the church, walking home afterwards talking about the church to different folk ‘evidently playing the part of Satan in the garden of Eden’.²³

²¹ *Potter’s Reply*, 11-12; *Ferguson’s Reply*, 18.

²² *Ferguson’s Reply*, 14.

²³ *Potter’s Reply*, 12.

The deacons interviewed Potter in June 1864 and asked him to resign which he refused to do and he then suggested Ferguson should move to another church. Two competing views of the role of the pastor and the church members emerged. Potter wrote that Ferguson's 'love of power in the church was fatal to its continued prosperity'. He challenged Ferguson that if the church was not more prosperous after a year he would then retire. Growth in numbers and finances was thus thought to be sufficient vindication of the righteousness of Potter's cause. Why should he leave 'to gratify the ambition of one man, who saw that every addition made to the membership augmented the influence of the minister and made his less felt'? He had accepted the pastorate as a permanent one unless he acted immorally or taught heresy: 'This was the good old-fashioned view of the Baptist body in which he had been trained'. (His training was in Congregational circles, as noted above.) Ferguson, argued Potter, looked upon the pastor as 'the mere employee', the servant of the church who could be removed at leisure, without the assignment of any cause other than the vote of a majority of the church.²⁴ Ferguson for his part replied that no other minister in the colony would stay in a church when the majority were opposed to him and that Potter 'ignored one of the fundamental principles of Congregational churches, and of every well regulated society, that the majority should settle every question that is brought before it'.²⁵ Thus, both Potter and Ferguson appealed to Baptist and Congregational principles to support their positions. How can a 'high' view of the ministry relate to a strong view of congregational government? Once goodwill fades and dominant personalities differ the problems can be immense. How can differences be reconciled? The role of the larger fellowship - an association or a union - becomes significant at least in an advisory capacity. But what happens when one party refuses to accept the association's advice? South Melbourne's experience provides an unhappy example of some difficulties which can arise in Baptist life.

A letter of 1 October 1864 signed by 24 people, or three quarters of the congregation, asked Potter to resign due to 'the prevailing dissatisfaction which exists under your pastorate'. Potter refused to comply and on 28 October Ferguson again wrote and asked Potter to let the dispute be settled by arbitration with the Baptist Association. Even though the church offered three months

²⁴ *Potter's Reply*, 12

²⁵ *Ferguson's Reply*, 16.

collections or £50 Potter declined to accept this challenge.²⁶ Finally, Ferguson wrote to the Executive of the Baptist Association and at a meeting on 5 December 1864 (at which Potter was present as a member of the Executive) it was recommended that Potter 'both for his own comfort and usefulness ... comply with the requisition presented to him by his church'.²⁷ Potter was unmoved by this resolution and finally on 28 December 1865, in order to prevent Potter 'from completely bringing the church to ruin', the church meeting resolved to depose him as pastor. Thirty members were present and only seven including Potter and his family opposed the vote. Potter then obtained the key to the chapel, changed the locks, had bolts put on, took his bedding and slept in the chapel. 'From his experience at Mount Clear, he knew that possession was nine points of the law, he therefore took full possession of the chapel, and when any of us wanted admission, he would either open the door himself or would send someone to do so, and would lock it after we had left'. What had happened at Mount Clear is unknown but this insulting treatment of church members - who were in the majority - was extraordinary if not without precedent.²⁸ Potter had refused to serve Ferguson the bread at communion and other members then rose and left the service. Things became so heated that Potter went to the police station and requested that a constable be sent to keep the peace at Howe Crescent although Ferguson denied that this had been necessary and that Potter had 'painted up these scenes'.

Clearly any semblance of church order was destroyed and on 20 February 1865 the church agreed to divide. The Howe Crescent Church adopted a trust deed for the property. Twenty members withdrew to form a new fellowship - five men, eleven married or widowed women and four single women. The departing members were granted use of the York Street property and Ferguson was given

²⁶ *Ferguson's Reply*, 15-16.

²⁷ Association Executive Minutes (Baptist Union of Victoria archives), 5 December 1864. (Association Executive minutes note that on 23 January 1865 [when Potter was present] a notice of motion regarding Potter [not recorded elsewhere] lapsed but the thrust of this is unknown.)

²⁸ John McKaeg, the first Baptist minister to come to Australia, had acted in this way during his troubled ministry at Bingley, Yorkshire, and B.G. Wilson, the pioneer pastor at Wharf Street in Brisbane had acted similarly after a dispute in his church: Manley, *From Woolloomooloo*, 20, 90.

half of the church fittings including a pulpit stand, a Bible and half a communion service. This last was a sad symbol of disunity.²⁹

The York Street property was reopened on 26 March and on 10 April 1865 the Baptist Association recognised the new Emerald Hill Church.³⁰ Having two churches in the one suburb was unfortunate to say the least. James Taylor commented in the *Australian Evangelist*: 'While we cannot but regret that it has been deemed necessary to commence a second congregation in the place, we wish our brethren success, and trust that out of seeming evil, God will bring glory to Himself and good to many'.³¹ Revd James Moss (1831-1900), a graduate of Regent's Park College who had been at Tenterden in Kent since 1857 and had recently arrived in the colony, began preaching at the new church in 1865 and eventually became pastor.³² The church grew and later moved to the hall of the Mechanics' Institute. Potter claimed that Ferguson soon fell out with Moss who threatened to take a group with him and then there would have been three Baptist churches on Emerald Hill!³³ This was avoided though Moss was pastor for only three years.

Meanwhile, on 30 October 1865 Potter and the Howe Crescent Baptist Church were received into the Association (by a narrow vote of eight for and seven against) and it appears that Potter had previously been suspended although records are unclear. A full report of the anniversary meetings in January 1866 at Howe Crescent was featured in the *Australian Evangelist*. The tea meeting was held in the church which was 'tastefully decorated with evergreens and flags' and a large banner displayed the motto, 'O Lord, send us prosperity'. This theme doubtless reflected Potter's challenge to Ferguson that after a year the church would be in a healthier state or else he would leave. In his annual report Potter referred to 'the storm which at the commencement of last year threatened our destruction' but insisted that now 'peace and concord' reigned. A manse had been built for the pastor on the (Crown granted) ground adjoining the church for a cost of £200. Receipts for the year were more than one-third higher than the previous year. As to membership 38 names had been removed: 20 to York Street, 14 to other churches, three were 'removed at a

²⁹ *Potter's Reply*, 14-17; *Ferguson's Reply*, 15-18.

³⁰ Association Minutes, 10 April 1865.

³¹ *Australian Evangelist*, 1865: 105.

³² (English) *Freeman*, 18 Jan 1865, 22 March 1865; obituary in *New South Wales Baptist*, 1 June 1900, 8.

³³ *Ferguson's Reply*, 16-17.

distance' and one had died: but the remaining number was not given. A pious exhortation concluded the report; 'Let not the painful experience of the past year be without its fruits unto righteousness [in] this one'.³⁴

A greater concern to the Association at this time, however, was the whole question of State Aid. David Rees (1804-85), a strong Dissenter who had led in campaigns against the compulsory payment of church rates in England, led the Association in June 1863 – just as the Howe Crescent Church was confirming its grant and opening its building – to emphasise Baptist commitment to voluntarism through these motions:

1. That believing that in matters of religion, whether in direct worship of the Almighty, or in the support of His cause in the world, man's actions can only be acceptable to God so far as they are influenced by an enlightened regard to the Divine will, this Association is fully convinced that the maintenance and extension of Christian truth should be entrusted to the voluntary efforts of its adherents.

2. That this Association cannot but regard the system which obtains in this Colony of making grants from the public revenue to the ministers of conflicting denominations towards the support of their respective forms of worship as being repugnant to reason and unjust in its operation, that it tends to confound the distinction between truth and error, is utterly at variance with the teaching and genius of the Gospel of Christ, and that it ought to be at once and for ever abolished.³⁵

These motions were the start of a vigorous campaign against all forms of State Aid. In November 1865 W.R. Wade presented a series of resolutions which confirmed the denomination's determination to support agitation for the complete abolition of State Aid and 'to maintain a strict adherence to scriptural and primitive practices'.³⁶ But in 1866 an application was made for land in East Melbourne for 'the Baptist denomination': evidently Collins Street – which had received its own grant of land back in 1845 – had made the request. The Association's executive waited upon the Commissioner of Public Lands and pointed out that the Association was completely opposed

³⁴ *Australian Evangelist*, 1866: 45.

³⁵ Brown, *Members One of Another*, 45-46. For Rees, see B.S. Brown, *A Cloud of Witnesses*, (Hawthorn: Victorian Baptist Historical Society, 1999), 113-14.

³⁶ Brown, *Members One of Another*, 47.

to all grants for religious purposes and a major dispute between the Association and the Collins Street Church was precipitated. Within that congregation opinion was divided but on 19 December the church gave notice of a motion to withdraw from the Association. This was a potential calamity as Collins Street was the largest church and the 'mother' congregation of the denomination. The Executive held anxious conversations with the church during 1867 but on 20 May the church gave its resignation to the Association which duly declined to accept it and struggled to find a solution.³⁷

Ten ministers, including Isaac New, the pastor of Albert Street, produced a pamphlet, *An Address to the Baptists of Victoria* which rehearsed the details of the dispute. A great principle was at stake, it was argued. How could Baptists give positive sanction to error? How could 'the Baptist denomination' support an application when the Association had expressly opposed such an action? 'Why not complete the circle by making a grant to the Chinese for building a Joss House and thus offer a direct insult to Heaven by patronising idolatry?' The writers lamented, 'We feel as if a great calamity had befallen us'.³⁸ The situation was eventually resolved by an even greater disaster which erupted as James Taylor, the Collins Street pastor, was involved in a public scandal about his own sexual immorality. In November 1868 the church withdrew its resignation and indeed the value of an Association's support became obvious and urgent as the church and denomination struggled to face the implications of this latest crisis.³⁹

This was the heated background against which Potter and the Howe Crescent church at Emerald Hill considered the possibilities after the State Aid Abolition Act was passed in 1870 which, as noted, allowed churches which held land grants to dispose of these if they so wished. The denomination through the Association had a very clear mind on the matter. At the 1870 annual meeting in November 'a very animated discussion' was provoked by the actions of 'several of the churches' which had become 'a public notoriety'. They formally disapproved of any church seeking any money from the State.⁴⁰ In the following months the Executive followed up any reports of any church acting against this principle. James Martin, who had succeeded

³⁷ Manley, *From Woolloomooloo*, 70-72.

³⁸ I, New (et al), *An Address to the Baptists in Victoria* (Melbourne: 1867).

³⁹ K.R.Manley, 'A Colonial Evangelical Ministry and a "Clerical Scandal": James Taylor in Melbourne (1857-1868)', *Baptist Quarterly* 39.2 (2001), 56-79.

⁴⁰ Baptist Association Minutes, 30 November 1870.

Taylor at Collins Street, was a keen supporter of the denomination's stance and in September the Executive resolved to see the Colony's Treasurer to protest against any state aid money being applied for by 'Messrs Potter, Turner and Bassett and others applying for it'.⁴¹ Potter was not alone, then, in exploring this possibility. John Turner (1817-94) was the first pastor of the Strict and Particular Baptist Church at Lonsdale Street and had obtained a grant of half an acre of land at the corner of Lonsdale and Stephen Street (now Exhibition Street) in 1850.⁴² James Bassett, recently arrived from Adelaide, was the pastor at the Ebenezer Church, Victoria Parade, another small Particular Baptist church – neither church was a member of the Association.⁴³ At the Executive of 2 October Potter criticised the reasons given by the deputation to the Treasurer but when it was noted that his assertions were being made on the basis of a press report even though no reporters had been present the chairman (James Martin) refused to hear any more from Potter.⁴⁴ The annual meeting of the Association confirmed the action of the Executive and at its meeting on 7 October 1872 the Executive noted that Potter had continued with his application to the Treasurer and his claim that some other churches had joined with him was denied by those churches.⁴⁵ Potter was now alone in pursuing this path and the Association was strongly against him.

Potter's actions soon become a scandal in the colony's press. The question of what to do with granted lands was a neat little conundrum for voluntarist congregations. In 1883 the Congregationalists celebrated the jubilee of their denomination in Australia with an inter-colonial conference in Sydney. Revd E. Day commented on state-aid questions. He noted that 'some few Congregationalists' had accepted grants of land but so far as he knew none had accepted any grants of money for pastoral support, as was allowed by the various Church Acts and as received by several other denominations. A distinction was drawn, suggested Day, by regarding the land as really the property of the colonists of which the

⁴¹ Baptist Association Executive Minutes, 19 September 1871.

⁴² Wilkin, *Baptists in Victoria*, 51-52; *Southern Baptist*, 31 January 1895, 32 is an obituary and claims the land grant had been made; L. Thomson, 'The Rev. John Turner-Particular Baptist Minister' (typescript, 1973, in BUV archives).

⁴³ For Bassett, see (English) Baptist Union Handbook (1872), 193 which lists Bassett at Victoria Parade from 1870 after he had previously been at Brougham Place in North Adelaide; *Earthen Vessel* (1867), 193.

⁴⁴ Baptist Association Minutes, 2 October 1871.

⁴⁵ Baptist Association Minutes, 7 October 1872.

government was only a trustee and that, in taking it, they were only receiving what was really their own. Still, most Congregationalists were opposed to all forms of state aid, including land grants. Indeed, a conference in 1855 had specifically affirmed that any such grant was 'contrary to sound policy, repugnant to the principles of the New Testament and injurious to that cause it professes to aid'. But what to do with lands already granted? The government could not resume the land and abandonment of such land would not be a restoration but the 'giving up of the land to persons called jumpers'. Moreover, thousands of pounds had been invested in buildings on these allotments. 'The only prudent thing now to be done is, apparently, to let the past alone, and be thankful that the State-aid Abolition Acts have been obtained and take care that they be kept intact.'⁴⁶

This was in most cases exactly what Baptists had done as well. The pioneer churches of Bathurst Street in Sydney and Collins Street in Melbourne had been built on land grants. These founding fathers had not believed that by accepting such grants they were compromising their voluntarist heritage. The peculiar nature of the Australian settlements was radically different from Britain and these grants were not thought to be church aid in the sense of one denomination being recognised as an established church but was distributed equitably to all denominations that met the basic requirements. The Hobart church applied for a grant but was unsuccessful. John Saunders of Bathurst Street did apply for salary support but was unsuccessful. Henry Dowling in Tasmania was paid by the colony but he was doing specialised work as a chaplain to convicts and accepted payment for that task.⁴⁷ As we have seen, Emerald Hill had been granted land at Howe Crescent. By this time state aid had become a contentious issue as Dissenters in England opposed any compulsory payment of church rates and the separation of church and state had become an increasingly articulated Baptist principle. What was different about the case of Potter and Howe Crescent was that - almost as soon as they could - they sold the land and took the money and it all seemed to go to Potter, not to the denomination and not to the local church. Other more established Baptist churches such as Collins Street or Bathurst Street simply continued to use their land as the Congregationalists had done.

⁴⁶ *Report of the Intercolonial Conference held in Pitt Street Church, Sydney, May 15th to 23rd, 1883, to celebrate the Jubilee of the Introduction of Congregationalism in Australia* (Sydney, 1883), 255-56.

⁴⁷ For details, see Manley, *From Woolloomooloo*, 25, 36-37.

The crux of the matter was simply this: had Potter acted dishonourably? Here the biased accounts of Potter and Ferguson may be supplemented by vigorous debate in the secular press. After the schism Ferguson was still a trustee of the Howe Crescent property and as he wanted to become a trustee for the York Street Church resigned as trustee for Howe Crescent. Ferguson had observed to Potter that 'many had such a detestation of State Aid, that, even if Mr Potter's Church gave up Howe Crescent, they could not conscientiously worship in its walls'.⁴⁸ New trustees were appointed for Howe Crescent and these obviously were supporters of Potter. Application was then made to sell part of the lands and mortgage the remainder and Potter received most of the proceeds on the basis that he had not been paid as pastor for many years. There seems little doubt that the procedure was legal since the trustees acted in the name of the church but controversy surrounded the fact that Potter ended up with most of the money.

Public attention was first given to this development when a letter to the *Age* newspaper of 19 September 1873 by 'Alpha' raised the situation at Emerald Hill, claiming that Potter had sold about half of the property with the manse on it for £1150. A small debt was paid off and the balance kept by Potter: 'I do not understand the new law, but it seems strange that a minister should be able to sell the land without consulting the church'. It was rumoured that the balance of the property was for sale for £2500.⁴⁹ This was followed up by two further damaging letters and a leading editorial in the *Age* of Saturday 27 September. One letter was from 'A Baptist' (identified as Albert Hahn by Ferguson) who had been attending Howe Crescent for six years. Earlier in the year he had asked to be received as a member by baptism by Potter but at the following Communion service had not been given the right hand of fellowship which would normally be the way of receiving a new member. When he heard about the sale of the land he went to Potter and asked why there had not been a church meeting to which Potter had replied that he was not a member of the church because he had never received the right hand of fellowship and no one had proposed him as a member. Hahn believed this was in order to prevent him from saying anything about church matters. Potter had told him this was not a Baptist church but a 'Free Church' (certainly Howe Crescent was not listed as a Baptist church in the Association Yearbook for 1874):

⁴⁸ *Potter's Reply*, 18.

⁴⁹ *Age*, 19 September 1873, 3.

What he means by that I cannot say, unless it is that Mr Potter is free to do as he pleases. He was treasurer; he took all the moneys, whether from rents or collections, and I never heard how much was received or how it was expended. He was secretary; he was pastor; he was trustee and now it appears is sole proprietor of the land that was granted to the Baptist denomination on Emerald Hill.

A similar letter from 'Truth' made the same allegation: 'It does not seem a *bone fide* sale'. The *Age* editorial was also highly critical of Potter and indeed the government for allowing it to happen. A number of voluntarists were charged with 'pious fraud' in that after conscientiously refusing to accept state aid they were now rushing to secure a share of 'the lapsed moneys' and conspicuous among these was Potter of Emerald Hill and his dealings were 'fraudulent on the face of it'.⁵⁰

This leader was what prompted Potter to prepare his pamphlet. He did not fail to point out that one of the regular leader writers for the *Age* was Revd William Poole who as it happened was also a Baptist minister and who regularly preached for the Mechanics' Institute congregation (which had moved from York Street) at Emerald Hill. He was also secretary of the Baptist Association. Poole (1830-1913), a Bristol College graduate who had emigrated in 1853 was active in journalism not only in Melbourne but also in Queensland where he moved in 1881.⁵¹ Potter then advanced his argument that only a clear knowledge of a 'long and exceptionally bitter ecclesiastical dispute' could unravel the property mysteries. He included a statement of his understanding of Baptist beliefs about the church:

Other denominations can scarcely conceive it possible that each Baptist congregation is, at law, a Denomination – a separate and distinct religious organization. Yet, such is the fact. We are Congregationalists. There is no Synod, Assembly, or Association that can interfere in any way whatever, either with the internal arrangement or with the property of the

⁵⁰ *Age*, 27 September 1873, 4, 7.

⁵¹ One fellow journalist of the *Courier* later ventured the comment that Poole was 'a better writer than a preacher' although Baptists in both colonies valued Poole's pastoral skills highly. He acquired a certain unwelcome notoriety as one of the few survivors when the *Ljee Moon* ran aground near Eden (NSW) in 1886. An obituary for Poole is in *Australian Baptist*, 25 March 1913, 8-9.

individual churches. ... Each congregation is complete within itself and is independent of all others ... when speaking of the Baptist denomination of Victoria, we simply mean the aggregation of the several Baptist Churches throughout the country, each Church being entirely independent of all others as regards its property and government.⁵²

Such an extreme version of Baptist independency reveals that Potter was out of step with the current efforts among the Baptists of Victoria to demonstrate that the values of an Association were integral to Baptist ecclesiology. David Rees had written in 1864 a defence of the Association's rationale. Whilst he accepted 'the entire independency of each individual church', he stressed the advantages of a 'more extended association': 'It is a grievous abuse of our principles when churches evince a reluctance to seek and receive advice from neighbouring brethren in cases of perplexity'.⁵³ The unhappy Potter affair can only have emphasised the value of such a view.

After giving a rather tendentious account of Ferguson's role and the disputes in the church, Potter then simply traced how he believed the trustees had acted legally. He cited a resolution of the church on 5 October 1873 supporting the trustees.⁵⁴

The legalities are difficult to unravel but the suspicion of having immorally acquired personal benefits stayed with Potter and many Baptists believed that he had betrayed the denomination's principles. The *Argus* of 27 December 1873 criticised Potter and the *Age* on 29 December rejected the charge that the editor of the *Age* was in conspiracy with Ferguson and the rival Baptist church and lambasted Potter:

Persons of the Potter stamp ... preach morality, but heaven help the world if the morals of its inhabitants were regulated by such men. ... Mr Potter has effectually prevented the congregation getting rid of him. The land and the church buildings are his own, and his salary is paid in advance until the end of 1879. If this be not fraud on a congregation, on the policy of the Abolition of the State Aid Act, and on the

⁵² *Potter's Reply*, vii-viii.

⁵³ Brown, *Members One of Another*, 35.

⁵⁴ *Potter's Reply*, 21-35.

Government, then the English language is destitute of a term to express dishonesty.⁵⁵

The *Australasian* of 3 January 1874 observed that such transactions as Potter's 'degrade religion in the eyes of the world'.⁵⁶

The suburban press bought into the dispute. Potter had been an editor of the *South Melbourne Standard* since 1862 but the rival *Emerald Hill Record* published letters and an editorial on the controversy. The leader of 12 February took up an even stance, regretting that the Baptists had been washing their dirty linen in public. They believed that the charges against Potter had not been proven and that the pamphlets and other publicity had brought the Baptists into 'unenviable notoriety and its principle [sic] leaders into some amount of disrepute with other denominations. ... We regret it in the interests of the Baptist Denomination on Emerald Hill, which has received a damage it will take a long time to repair'.⁵⁷

That was perhaps the most accurate observation about the whole sorry mess. Yet both the South Melbourne Church and Potter found a measure of prosperity in the ensuing years. Potter's church seems to have disbanded in the aftermath of the controversy but the Mechanics' Institute church built a new brick chapel of 'early Norman style' in Dorcas Street in 1877, seating six hundred at a cost of £3700.⁵⁸ The pastor from 1875 was William Poole. Revd F.G. Buckingham from Spurgeon's College succeeded Poole for the next ten years and during his ministry the church attained its largest size with some 240 members and a Sunday School of 400.⁵⁹ Following the collapse of the land boom in the 1890s the South Melbourne Church declined in numbers though a succession of capable ministers served the church across the decades. The families of Ferguson, Youl and other pioneers retained association with the church for many years. Reflecting the decline of the district, South Melbourne Baptist Church was finally dissolved in 1950 and the property was sold to the Lutheran Church for a sum of about £4,000 and this money was used by the Baptist Union to help other Baptist work such as the church at

⁵⁵ *Age*, 29 December 1873, 4.

⁵⁶ Cited in *Ferguson's Reply*, 29-30.

⁵⁷ *South Melbourne Record*, 12 February 1874, 2.

⁵⁸ Priestley, *South Melbourne*, 75 reproduces a drawing of the church from the *Illustrated Australian News*, 23 January 1878; by this year the membership of the church was 139.

⁵⁹ Wilkin, *Baptists in Victoria*, 47.

Albert Park and development of the Anglesea Camp site.⁶⁰ No one individual gained financial benefits on this occasion and the Baptist Union was trustee for all church properties.

Potter became a leading activist and an influential figure in Melbourne. According to Ferguson, Potter was determined not to let the Baptists get the Howe Crescent site and said he would apply for a living with the Church of England.⁶¹ The land was sold privately and Potter certainly left the Baptist movement. A contemporary biographer simply observed that 'a difference of opinion on ecclesiastical polity between Mr Potter and his deacons' led to his becoming a member of the Church of England and according to one obituary he was an active evangelical who 'often preached in mission halls'.⁶²

His main fame, however, was outside ecclesiastical circles.⁶³ His public career embraced journalism, beginning with his role as editor of the *South Melbourne Standard* from 1862. In 1881 he purchased the *South Melbourne Record* although in 1889 he sold it to his son William. Potter wrote leaders for the *Herald* in Melbourne from 1867 with special emphasis on educational matters and he was active in 1872 as one of the founders of the Victorian Education League and became its secretary. This League acted to secure 'secular, compulsory and free' education which became the law in Victoria in 1872. In 1875 he was given authority to visit state schools and in June 1879 founded the *Australasian Schoolmaster* which circulated to all colonies and became the leading educationalist publication in the country. He was in touch with leading educationalists throughout the world and was a regular correspondent to the daily press on any educational issue.

In 1872, just as his difficulties with the Baptists were so problematic, Potter was elected a member of the Royal Society of Victoria and in 1878 was elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of England and later as a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society of England. He joined the Australasian Royal Geographical Society in 1885 and was appointed a life member after having helped to organise a number of significant exploration expeditions in New Guinea and Central Australia. He was secretary of the Australasian Antarctic Exploration Committee and was a member of other

⁶⁰ *Baptist Union of Victoria, Handbook for 1950*, 60.

⁶¹ *Ferguson's Reply*, 21.

⁶² *Cyclopaedia of Victoria*, 2, 42; *Melbourne Punch*, 30 April 1908, 622.

⁶³ Details from *Cyclopaedia of Victoria*.

societies devoted to geology and history. He was a close friend of Baron Sir Ferdinand von Mueller (1825-96) who had been appointed the Government Botanist for Victoria in 1853 and was the Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne from 1853 until 1873 when he was controversially replaced.⁶⁴ Potter was appointed Mueller's literary executor, prepared several of Mueller's significant botanical works for publication and helped to have a monument erected on Mueller's grave in St Kilda Cemetery.⁶⁵

William Potter's legacy was not so highly valued among the Baptists of South Melbourne. Indeed, no mention of his name has appeared in the histories of Baptists in Victoria and to reconstruct the confused saga of the schism and the public scandal of the 1870s has been a complex task. Yet his troubled ministry illustrates several features of Baptist ecclesiology ranging across the problems arising from the acceptance of State Aid by a voluntarist denomination, the role of a pastor within a congregationally governed community, the exaggerated autonomy of a local church when it conflicts with all the advice and pressure of an associational body and how to discipline a pastor when deep suspicions of immorality arise. If the plea that prosperity should be the test of an authentic ministry, as Potter evidently proposed, then in the short term his rival church was blessed even as his own work collapsed. Yet in the longer view, South Melbourne - like most other churches - was always subject not only to the faith and human foibles of its members but to varying eras of success and struggle often shaped by the context in which it was placed. This story of a schism and its aftermath invites Baptists to reflect on their theology and practice, certainly at a time when denominations receive so much government support for various ministries. Even though the South Melbourne Baptist Church has

⁶⁴ See E. Kynaston, *A Man on Edge: A life of Baron Sir Ferdinand von Mueller* (London: Allen Lane, 1981); Deirdre Morris, 'Mueller, Sir Ferdinand Jakob Heinrich von [Baron von Mueller] (1825 - 1896)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Online Edition, 2006, Australian National University.

⁶⁵ Potter was engaged in several disputes about Mueller's papers and did not complete a biography he was preparing. His activities on behalf of the Antarctic Expedition found him moving in high political and social circles. Fellow Baptist, politician Robert Reid, gave £1,000 to the project. See R.W. Home, A.M. Lucas, S. Maroska, D.M. Sinkora and J.H. Voight (eds), *Regards Yours. Selected Correspondence of Ferdinand Von Mueller* (New York: Peter Lang, 3 vols, 1998-2006), pp. 40-42, 44, 359, 422, 715-16, 630-32, 766, 771,

long since disappeared the witness of a faithful and fallible community across almost a hundred years is worth recalling.

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