Historiography of Baptist Churches

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Abstract

This paper looks at the nature of the knowledge of Baptist church history. First, it considers various competing conceptions of church history: as a history of thought and theology, a history of growth, the roles of significant figures, a history of institutions, and the stories of ordinary people. Second, the Baptist family of churches is subject to both centralising and decentralising forces. Third, denominational boundaries are artificial; many important topics of study are cross-denominational, and each Baptist church is autonomous and creates its own separate history. Fourth is whether or not church history mirrors the New Testament view of the church.

This short paper seeks answers to the question: What is the nature of the knowledge an historian deals with in studying the history of Western Australian Baptist churches?

Different approaches

The church historian cannot usually cover all the different approaches equally as well in the same work, and must usually emphasise one over the others.

The first approach, exemplified in Wiliston Walker's History of the Christian Church (2014), traces *the history of Christian thought*.

The second is exemplified in Kenneth Scott Latourette's A History of the Expansion of Christianity (1945), which traces the history of *missions and expansion of Christianity*.

The third is *the role of significant figures*. The historiography of Baptist churches in Western Australia is skewed by the contribution of figures such as William Kennedy and Max Wells, who had such significant roles in establishing the Baptist churches of the southeast suburbs and the Great Southern. To an unusual extent, Baptist history in Western Australia is not a collective history of Baptists but the history of a small number of individuals. In another way, the study of the roles of significant figures is consistent with the Walker-Latourette dichotomy. For example, a history of Christian thought must include its major thinkers, such as Augustine, Tertullian, Origen, Jerome, Luther, and Calvin. Similarly, a history of Christian expansion must include the role of a different group of people, such as William Carey, Adiniram Judson, and Hudson Taylor.

Another approach is quite *institutional*. The historian goes through the minutes of board and members' meetings and official correspondence, selects non-routine items, and then organizes and edits them into a readable narrative. This kind of formal history presents an illusion of factuality. Official minutes are usually written in a sanitised style to prevent embarrassment and disagreement. Moreover, the information is highly selective, for example, administrative matters, some statistics, funds, the appointment of pastors (especially if they are ordained), purchase and sale of land, and perhaps the role of formal worship services.

Formal institutional histories generally omit the dynamics of groups of friends, and are less likely to mention the activities that they enjoyed and the roles of people with great influence or power but without commensurate formal authority. In fact, ordinary members do not attend board meetings, and, if they attend members' business meetings at

all, sometimes find them quite boring. Those formal histories also do not reflect the informal processes that determine major decisions. For example, some pastors run their churches as benevolent dictatorships and use their boards as personal support teams. Other pastors are controlled by their boards, especially when some board members are old enough to be their parents. In other cases, somebody else in the church has enough influence to control the institutional leadership.

The last approach is the *records and reminiscences of ordinary church people*. Many churches start as groups of friends doing things they enjoy, and the ethos of excitement in the early days tends to fuel the church later on. Afterwards, people tend to remember the ethos of the church, the significant people, and activities in which they participated, although much of this history might not be represented in its institutional records. In some churches, the role of activities other than the main Sunday worship services might be at least as important in the life of the church. For example, at one stage, Ingram records, the engine room of the Maylands Baptist Church was the Christian Endeavour group, not the church itself. (Ingram, 1996, pp. 5f.)

Centralising and decentralising forces

Baptist history is the story of the tension between centralising and decentralising forces. Denominational loyalty has a centralising effect, as are the services of the Baptist Union such as insurance, some aspects of government relations, denominational missions, campsites, theological education, and ordination. However, decentralising forces have become stronger in the postmodern era. Churches have less denominational loyalty and some of them no longer even use "Baptist" in their names. An increasing number of accredited pastors graduated from theological training outside Baptist circles.

Artificial boundaries

"Baptist" is an artificial boundary. Western Australian Baptists are defined as affiliation with the Western Australian Baptist Union, and this is the definitive boundary between Baptist and non-Baptist. After that, Baptist distinctives are also points of definition although they are by no means exclusively Baptist. (Moore 1996, p. 11.)

However, a Baptist church can have more in common with a non-Baptist church than with another Baptist church. Post-denominationalism has increasingly made the boundary less meaningful. In other words, "Baptist" is only a label of convenience when an interdenominational approach would be more helpful for studying topics in church history. For Western Australian Baptists, some of the most pertinent issues might be the contrasts between rural and urban churches, church planting and evangelistic strategies, and the dynamics of growing and declining churches. Yet these are not denominational issues and an artificial constraint is unhelpful.

Being "Baptist" is not monolithic. The big picture is really only the institutional practices of the Baptist Union and their implications for local Baptist churches. However, Baptist churches are autonomous groups of people in the community who have a congregational system of government. Consequently, the denominational big picture is necessarily incomplete, and even misleading if viewed in isolation.

The other picture is lots of little pictures of ordinary people. Baptist churches are independent even though they are part of a network. They run their own affairs and raise their own funds. Most of what happens is the routine week by week activities. Most of the people are ordinary people and leaders who are seldom recognised for what they do, even in their own churches. To some extent, the distinction between denomination and local church is much like the distinction between the institutional local church and the activities of its church members.

To illustrate, a visitor's first view of ancient Southeast Asia would normally be the rural village of subsistence rice farmers. Their activities of daily life were routine and mundane, and their history was generally unrecorded except in oral legend. The visitor

might prefer to hasten to the city where the "real history" was made. Yet most people lived in the villages and the story of the people is mostly the story of the village.[1]

Admittedly, the boundary between denomination and local church can appear unclear. For example, it is not enough to say that Baptists planted churches in the northern half of the state in the 1970s and 1980s. To say that it was a denominational effort one would need to know whether it was coordinated and orchestrated, or whether it was the result of many small, separate, local efforts that were subject to the same overarching cultural drivers. It would be misleading to give the impression that it was a centralised and coordinated denominational effort when it as not. Consider, for example, this quote from *Contact*:

> "During November the emphasis is on our Home Mission Programme. The last two or three years have seen an amazing development in this field of our Ministry. Those of us who have been involved in this developing program are constantly reminded that it is not the result of careful planning, surveys or recommendations. It has been a case of keeping up with the spontaneous movements of the Spirit of God in a number of centres. Places such as … have seen the commencement of a Baptist work, not because we decided to move into an unclaimed area, but because among those already living there, God has called together a fellowship ….[2]

The paradox is that local people in local Baptist churches had taken all the initiative and the Baptist Union did not have a real "Home Mission Programme."

A mirror of the New Testament?

Is church history done in a way that mirrors the view of the church in the New Testament? With the question of eisogesis aside, does it help us understand the ancient church, and do the lessons of the early church apply transparently to the modern church? If not, why not? Of the many possibilities, consider these few examples:

1. Joy of new believers in fellowship (Acts 2:43ff.)
2. The roles of spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12, 14)
3. The danger of false teachers (2 Cor. 11:3ff.)
4. The sacrifices of pioneers (2 Cor. 11:23ff.)
5. The problem of divisiveness (I Cor. 1:10ff)
6. Healing disputes Acts 15
7. Diotrophes "who loves to be their leader" (3 Jn. 9)

Conclusion

In this brief opinion paper, I have suggested that various competing viewpoints present a challenge to the Baptist historian whose task is to find the best balance between them. First, one must choose a particular approach. Second, the Baptist family of churches is subject to both centralising and decentralising forces. Third, the denominational boundary is artificial; many important topics of study are cross-denominational, and each Baptist church is autonomous and creates its own separate history. Fifth is whether or not church history mirrors the New Testament view of the church.

1 Based on Steinberg (ed.), 1971, p. 11.

2 *Contact,* Nov. 1961. Vol. 1, no. 5.

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