

Collins Street Baptist Church  
July 15, 2018  
10.30am

**CLAIMING OUR IDENTITY**  
**The Tradition That Has Shaped Us**

1 Peter 2.1-10

It's time for me to come clean. I never wanted to be a Baptist. Though raised in the Baptist Church in Dandenong with a devout Baptist family, as a boy I secretly imagined myself an Anglican. From time to time, I snuck into St Luke's at the other end of the street. Their church had a spire, their priest wore robes, and they spoke prayers from a book that sounded almost poetic. Even more, they had candles.

While I still have a thing for candles, decades later I can say with confidence that I'm very glad to be a Baptist. The change in attitude has nothing to do with one tradition being better than another. For me, it's about embracing the tradition that has shaped me, owning the community that has so formed my understanding of the church and of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

The fact is, every tradition or denomination has its own particular 'stuff' attached to what church and faith look like. When I hear people say, "Oh I'm not a Baptist or a Catholic or an Anglican. I'm just a Christian" it's as if they are saying I have no stuff attached to my faith at all. It's just pure. The truth is, dig a little deeper and you discover that all of us have our stuff: particular beliefs, practices, preferences, convictions. It may not have a label, but the stuff attached to your faith is as real for you as it is for every one of us. Our stuff, whatever form it takes, is part of who we are. I may well say, I'm not a Holt, I'm just a human. The fact is, though, I'm a Holt human. Because of who I am and where I come from, I have been shaped in particular ways that have a profound influence upon my identity and the way I live this human life of mine. In a similar way, I am a Baptist, shaped by my tradition. It is part of who I am as a person of faith.

A couple of years ago I was privileged to attend the inauguration of the Anglican Primate of Australia. It was a beautiful occasion in the majestic space of St Paul's Cathedral. There were Bishops and Archbishops from around the nation. The Governor of Victoria was there alongside the Governor-General of Australia. And there were heads of churches from across the ecclesial spectrum. The clerical procession into the cathedral was long and grand. Feeling awkward in my poor excuse for Baptist robes and in the assumption of others that I was some kind of Baptist Archbishop, I paraded in self-consciously alongside others who all looked so much more assured. Once seated under the great dome that soars above the altar, I looked out on the grandeur of it all. It was extraordinary: the organ fanfares and the magnificent choral music of the choir rising into the space above. It was a moment.

Part way through the service, the Archbishop of Canterbury was led with incense to the high pulpit. Dressed in his beautiful robes with his mitre and his crook, he ascended the stairs to preach the most wonderful sermon on what it means to follow Jesus. It was good. But as I looked up at him, inspired by his message, I thought to myself, how much stuff we have attached over 2000 years of history to the simple call of Jesus, "follow me!" Don't get me wrong. So much of that stuff is beautiful and life giving and good, but its stuff. It's extra to the essence of that compelling call.

The fact is, some 400 year ago the early Baptists began to call some of that stuff into question. With the impetus of the Protestant reformation behind them, they were driven by a desire to return to a New Testament understanding of faith and church. In light of an institution that had become heavy with hierarchy and stuff, the Baptists wanted to par back, to return to the simplicity of faith in Christ alone, to rediscover the church as a local gathering of believers with nothing but the Word of God open before them and the witness of the Spirit among them.

To begin, they met in each other's home, just like in the book of Acts. When they got around to building structures in which to meet, they were the most simple chapels with white washed walls. No crosses, no musical instruments, no stuff to distract from the simplicity of gathering to hear the voice of God together. Even as those chapels grew in

size and grandeur, churches like ours were built to resemble public meeting places not churches with spires and bell towers. These early Baptists had particular convictions: that the church is the people gathered, not the building; that Christ is Lord of the church and we bow to no other authority; that the priesthood is shared, not embodied in one person; that baptism is an adult expression of faith that follows one's personal submission to the Lordship of Christ; that the church's only authority comes from the scriptures read and interpreted by the people of God gathered together; and that there is freedom of conscience among believers, space for people within the faith to reach different conclusions and have different convictions about issues of faith and life.

Of course, as with all new movements, the weaknesses of the Baptist tradition soon became evident. Firstly, the belief that we can return to some pure New Testament way of being church is naïve at best. The truth is, the New Testament is witness to the fact that the followers of Jesus struggled from the very beginning to be the church and to understand what it means to live the Christian faith. There is no one, pure and biblical way to do it. Second, the history of Christian faith tells us that you can't live the Christian life without some stuff. We need places and rituals and beauty and art and music and leadership because that's how we are as people. Traditions develop out of human need for structure and community. It doesn't make all traditions good, but they develop for a reason. Thirdly, all this talk of freedom of conscience and the autonomy of the local church puts an incredible pressure upon a community and makes us prone to divisions and splits all over the place. In a tradition like ours everyone is constantly heading off in different directions with different labels. That's why we have the General Baptists, the Particular Baptists, the Strict and Particular Baptists, the Dissenting Baptists, the Independent Baptists, the Conservative Baptists, the Cooperative Baptists, and the list goes on. Frankly, it's only proved the point: we all have our stuff.

As we celebrate our 175<sup>th</sup> birthday next Sunday, we do so owning our stuff, our Baptist stuff. This wonderful, diverse and slightly odd tradition from which we come is a part of who we are. It has shaped us and continues to shape our mission and identity in important ways.

Our name is important: **Collins Street Baptist Church**. First, the words ‘Collins Street’ place us. We are not the Melbourne Baptist Church. We are not New Life or St John’s Baptist Church. Our identity as a church is tied up with where we are in the most local and particular sense. This is where we belong and where we are responsible for being a community of faith. Apart from this place, our mission does not exist. It’s a very Baptist way of thinking of the church. The church is first local before it is universal. Second, the word ‘Baptist’ says something important about where we come from and what we hold as important in our belief and our practice. And thirdly, the word ‘church’ says what we are. We are not a club, a union, a political party or a business. We are a community of faith, founded by Christ our cornerstone, commissioned by God as a priesthood proclaiming light and embodying truth to the world. Each of these aspects to our name say something profound about our belonging: we belong to this place; we belong to this tradition; and we belong to God. These things matter. They are part of the important stuff we carry together.

Two Sundays ago, we had a difficult conversation. In light of the change to the marriage act that came into law at the end of last year, we had to wrestle together with issues related to sexuality and marriage. When it comes to our decision making about such things, we begin with a common set of convictions. Some of those are outlined on the inside cover of your bulletin today. They are not a creed. We are not a people of creeds that get read out each Sunday. Instead they form a common understanding from which we work. They certainly don’t cover everything, but provide a beginning point for our deliberations on all sorts of things. What’s important to note is that as Baptists we have no papal encyclical to guide our decisions on a particular issue, no council of bishops to govern our actions. What we have is a local community of believers with the bible open before us and the presence of God’s Spirit among us.

Conundrums like the one we faced two Sundays ago present a high degree of freedom coupled with a sobering level of responsibility before God. Added to this is our commitment to freedom of conscience. That is, even in the wrestling we do locally and together, we won’t all come away in fierce agreement. This is both our strength and our Achilles’s heal. You see, it’s not easy being a Baptist, but it’s who we are.

In our 175 years of history, we have wrestled in our distinctive Baptist way many times. In our earliest days we wrestled with the nature of communion and whether the table should be open to all. We then wrestled with the nature of membership. Should it be open to people from other traditions or only to those who have been baptized like us? We have wrestled with the nature of our mission, our obligations to the indigenous people of this land and to the White Australia policy. We have wrestled with the place of music in worship and whether or not Christians should go to the theatre. We have wrestled with the tensions between grace and holiness and how those who have sinned should be held to account. We have wrestled with a Christian perspective on war and our allegiance to the Crown and we have disagreed with each other strongly. We have wrestled with our perspectives on the right of women to vote and the right of women to preach and lead in the church. We have wrestled with our attitudes to divorce and to free market capitalism. We've struggled with the differences between Protestants and Catholics and whether we can be in fellowship. We have wrestled with our responses to the labour movement and to the rights and responsibilities of workers. We have wrestled with our understandings of the Sabbath, our approaches to the Bible, the presence of crosses in the church, the consumption of alcohol, our attitudes to homelessness and the plight of asylum seekers. The wrestling, you see, has never stopped, because our Baptist way of being the church requires that we find a way to live well with our differences while continuing to be the church in this place, one that is faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In 1871, the third pastor of Collins Street, the Reverend James Martin, spoke to a gathering of the South Australian Baptist Association, and argued passionately that without freedom of thought and the wrestling it entails, we cease to be Baptists.

*“It is no use to teach creeds, for men will not swallow them, and if you take to a man a well organised system of religion that he must wear like a straightjacket, he will show you that he is a sane man by tearing it off. Do not say you like freedom of thought if when you read the most recent skeptical work you say nothing but how sad it is to see how skeptical people have become. Do not say you believe in liberty of conscience when you look down on a man who has changed his opinions as if that man has committed an*

*unpardonable sin. Instead, let us encourage enquiry. For that is the strength of who we are.”*

I am very glad to be a Baptist. Even more, I am glad to be a part of this Baptist church, for despite our struggles over 175 years, our wrestling with each other, our efforts to discern truth and light when the way ahead has been unclear, this remains a community of thinking people committed to the Word of God, to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, to the shared wisdom of the people of God, and to the proclamation of the good news that we have experienced in Jesus. That’s a church I am glad to be part of.

Amen.