

The common good as a motivating principle for Baptist mission in Australian society

By Rod Benson

Introduction

On a range of faith-related issues the British and American experiences have profoundly influenced thought and action among Australian Baptists. Through the twentieth century, as Richard Mouw has observed, evangelical Christians tended to respond to the onslaughts of pluralism, relativism and scientism by weaving together three interrelated strands of thought: a remnant ecclesiology in which the true church is seen as a cognitive minority; an apocalyptic eschatology that understands the larger culture as heading toward destruction; and an antithetical epistemology that insists on a radical difference between Christian and non-Christian interpretations of reality. These three strands of thought have exerted profound influence on the shape of evangelical belief, and on the ways in which evangelicals have engaged in social responsibility, among Australian Baptists.

Notions of the common good have long empowered religious and non-religious initiatives aimed at benevolence, education, social responsibility and social transformation. With respect to religious initiatives, and in particular those pursued by Baptist individuals and groups, the idea of the common good as a motivating principle finds its philosophical foundations in Aristotelian, Thomistic and neo-Thomistic ethics, and enjoys popular uncritical support. However, little scholarly attention has been given to the ways in which notions of the common good may be informed and enriched by biblical, theological and missiological perspectives on society and Christian ministry, and vice versa. While there is a growing body of research on Baptist social and ethical responsibility, not least in terms of historical perspectives, the apparent foundations for such action are often poorly articulated or ignored, and the implications for contemporary Baptist ministry and mission are often overlooked.

This paper addresses these concerns in three ways. First, the paper briefly examines the history of the concept of the common good, noting its strength in Catholic social teaching and the ways in which it has been appropriated by Protestant thought.

Second, the paper investigates how the common good was articulated and exemplified in the social responsibility activities of churches associated with the Baptist Union of New South Wales (NSW) in the first half of the twentieth century. In the years immediately preceding the First World War, there was arguably strong advocacy of the common good and appeals to socialist principles among evangelical Baptists in Australia. Indeed the first official Baptist minister in the colony of NSW, the Rev John Saunders, campaigned strongly for social justice (in particular temperance, the rights of Aboriginal people, the abolition of the convict system, and European immigration) as well as engaging in pioneer missionary work that laid the foundations for the Baptist denomination in NSW.

Third, the paper analyses selected recent contributions by Australian church leaders to the scholarly conversation on the “missional” or “emerging” church to identify the extent to which the common good is articulated as a motivating principle for mission in the twenty-first century.

The paper concludes by suggesting that, though often poorly recognized and articulated, the pursuit of the common good is integral to Baptist mission; and that social justice should be considered as a fifth essential

descriptor of evangelicalism today alongside David Bebbington's well known definition of evangelicalism as a commitment to biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism.

The notion of the common good

The notion of the common good appears to have originated in classical Greek thought. It was a transcultural idea and it is therefore not surprising to see it reflected to some degree in biblical teaching on justice. In English usage, 'righteousness' is often associated with the notion of *personal* moral rectitude, while 'justice' generally signifies a right *social* order, evidenced by the proper distribution of goods, relations between persons, and retribution for evil. Righteousness typically pertains to matters of piety and religion; justice to legal and social issues.¹ In biblical usage, however, such a distinction is not apparent.²

In the Old Testament, the key terms are justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedaqah*), often used together.³ Both terms possess a social dimension, and convey a meaning close to the concerns of "social justice" as we might understand the term today.⁴ The people of God are called to live in accordance with divine justice, and to model it in their relations with others; it is on this basis that their works will be judged.⁵ A related term is *shalom*, variously translated as "peace" or "wholeness," conveying Yahweh's intention for the whole human community and indeed the entire created order. This concern for justice and wholeness is reflected in the New Testament. Mary emphasises justice in her song in Luke 1:46-55. Jesus affirmed his mission as one of justice (Lk 4:14-21). He confronted those who denied justice to the poor, associated with those to whom justice had been denied, and encouraged people to pursue righteousness, justice and peace. The New Testament letters, particularly James, convey a preferential concern for the weaker members of the community, and address issues of conflict and injustice. Jesus himself "went about doing good," apparently indiscriminately (Acts 10:38). Paul enjoined the Christians at Corinth to work together "for the common good" (1 Cor 12:7, NIV). A similar idea appears in Luke 10:25-37 and Matthew 25:31-46 and elsewhere. The common good is not a synonym for social justice, but the desire for justice and wholeness expressed in human community implies a commitment by the people of God to the common good.

One of the earliest extant references to the common good is in relation to Aristotle's notion of the good life. His conception of morality found its centre in the "conviction that a good life is one devoted to the pursuit of good purposes or ends."⁶ He recognised the tension between what we might call individual rights and community responsibility, but took a communitarian view of the good:

Even if the good is the same for the individual and the city, the good of the city clearly is the greater and more perfect thing to attain and to safeguard. The attainment of the good for one person alone is, to be sure, a source of satisfaction; yet to secure it for a nation and for cities is nobler and more divine.⁷

Leading Christian theologians, most notably Thomas Aquinas, affirmed the primacy of the common good over the particular goods of individuals, and picked up on Aristotle's allusion to a religious dimension. Thomas advanced two reasons for the superiority of the common good over its private counterpart. First, one

¹ John R. Donahue, *The Bible and social justice: 'Learn to do right! Seek justice' (Isa 1:17 NIV)*, in Michael J. Gorman (ed.), *Scripture: An ecumenical introduction to the Bible and its interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), p. 240.

² M.A. Seifrid, "Righteousness, justice, and justification," in T.D. Alexander & Brian S. Rosner (eds), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), p. 740.

³ For example, Isa 28:7; 32:16-17; Hos 2:19-20.

⁴ See, for example, Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 48; Barbara Johnson, "mishpat," in G. Johannes Botterweck, H. Ringgren & H.-J. Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (vol. 9; Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 86-98; and Johnson, "tsedaqah," in Botterweck *et al*, *op. cit.*, vol. 12, pp. 239-264.

⁵ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1981), pp. 945-946.

⁶ David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 3.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. Martin Oswald; Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), p. 1049.

may judge the goodness of a person only in relation to the extent that the common good is his/her goal (the argument of quantification).⁸ Second, the right ordering of society results in the common good (the argument of qualification). For Thomas, persons become virtuous as they promote the common good through a concern for social justice. Similarly, the common good is expressed in the biblical commandment to love God with all of one's being and to love one's neighbour as oneself.

In the sixteenth century, Ignatius of Loyola also advocated the common good.⁹ The Society of Jesus he founded strove to serve the greater glory of God, which he radically identified with the common good. For Ignatius, the common good referred to the defence and propagation of the faith, but also to education of youths and illiterates, and the compassionate support of prison and hospital inmates. The distinctive contribution of Ignatius to the idea of the common good is his expansion of the vision to specifically embrace all humankind. Indeed the term "the more universal good" frequently appears in the order's *Constitutions* as the criterion by which the order's members should determine what service of God and the church might mean in a given situation.¹⁰

While the common good was not precisely defined in antiquity, it effectively refers to a normative standard for evaluating the justice of social, legal and political arrangements promoting "the full flourishing of everyone in the community."¹¹ *The common good is the common goal of all who promote the justice of a politically organised community, and its achievement delivers a common sense of fulfilment. A common good is any good sought and/or enjoyed by two or more persons.*¹² A common good may be experienced in isolation but is realised more profoundly when shared in community: "common good includes aggregates of private, individual goods but transcends these aggregates by the unique fulfilment afforded by mutuality, shared activity, and communion of persons."¹³

Put another way, the common good "describes an environment that is supportive of the development of human potential while safeguarding the community against individual excesses. It looks to the general good, to the good of the many over the interests of the one or the very few."¹⁴ Or as the Second Vatican Council put it, the common good is "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily."¹⁵ With reference to the discussion of the biblical imperatives outlined above, the Vatican II document further states that "[t]he obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person, contributing to the common good, according to his own abilities and the needs of others, also promotes and assists the public and private institutions dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life."¹⁶

The idea of the common good is a leading motif of Catholic social teaching, enshrined in a range of papal, conciliar and other magisterial documents. Australian Catholic theologian Michael Costigan has observed that, "[w]hile, in general, the social teachings are not unique to Roman Catholicism, the Popes and other Church leaders have developed them more systematically than other Churches in the period since 1891, when Pope Leo XIII issued his Encyclical Letter, *Rerum Novarum*."¹⁷ In general, Protestant theologians, philosophers and practitioners have accepted the Catholic social teaching as their own, given it a respectful if

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1-2, q. 92 (a) 1, ad 3.

⁹ David Hollenbach, *Common Good*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ James Bernard Murphy, "common good," in Robert Audi (gen. ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (second edition; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 161.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ William J. Byron, *The Power of Principles: Ethics for the new corporate culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), p. 155.

¹⁵ Walter M. Abbott (ed.), *Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966), p. 225.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁷ Michael Costigan, "Catholic Social Teaching," a foundation document of the Centre for an Ethical Society, available at <http://www.ces.org.au/uploaded/articles/00005.pdf>, dated 21 Nov 2006, found on 26 Nov 2006.

disinterested nod, or ignored it as inimical to their pragmatic agendas founded on the doctrines of political liberal and individualism.

The public good is achieved through the aggregation by public institutions of goods characterised by principles such as non-rivalry and non-excludability. Thus, as Hollenbach observes, the enjoyment of a public good by some people does not mean that others cannot enjoy it. Further, if a public good “is there for all, it is there for everyone; if it is present for anyone, it is present for all.”¹⁸ The common good includes, but is not limited to, public goods. According to James B. Murphy, “the common good is best promoted by, in addition to the state, many lower-level non-public societies, associations, and individuals.” This is the application of the principle of subsidiarity. One danger of emphasis on the public good – in contrast to an informed understanding of, and contribution to, the common good – is that neoliberal economists delight in defining public goods in purely economic terms, reframing arguments for social justice to suit the ideological agenda of economic fundamentalists.¹⁹ The common good cannot be reduced to purely economic terms since it includes human relationships of mutuality, affection and non-rivalry – relationships entered into and necessary for their own sake, not merely in order to satisfy some pragmatic end.

Of course, the existence of a very large community, or a plurality of visions for society, might subvert or eclipse the common good.²⁰ This is the challenge brought by John Rawls in his *Political Liberalism*.²¹ In addition to cultural diversity and pluralism, there are other potential barriers to a successful embrace of the common good in a modern society. For example, the benefits provided by the common good are distributed indiscriminately, including to those who choose not to contribute to the goal. Another barrier is the extreme individualism championed by many Western nations today, “in which it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to convince people that they should sacrifice some of their freedom, some of their personal goals, and some of their self-interest, for the sake of the common good.”²² Another barrier is the problem of unequally shared burdens: in order to achieve and maintain the common good, some members of a community will necessarily bear much greater responsibility for the costs than others.

What, then, is the common good? It is analogous to the biblical teaching on justice and *shalom*, and the Gospel imperative of neighbour-love. It is a principle that seeks to protect a community against the excesses of despotism and individualism. It describes the ideal social conditions for the flourishing and fulfilment of every member of a community. It is the responsibility “to contribute to the development and maintenance of a good and fair society, doing what [one] can for the benefit of everyone – or to say the same thing negatively, doing nothing that will harm anyone.”²³ It enables discussion of the kind of society that is desirable, how such a social reality might be realised, and what contribution one is willing to make to see it take root in the soil of a particular community.

Evangelicals and social justice

Evangelical Christians (and Baptists in particular) may well warm to the notion of the common good outlined above, but at least three historical and theological impediments hamper their effective application of the common good to their social milieu. Baptists are not a creedal church; they hold tenaciously to the doctrine of

¹⁸ Hollenbach, *Common Good*, p. 8.

¹⁹ Geoff Dornan, “The necessity of and priority for the common good in contemporary Australia: A response to the Leader of the Federal Opposition’s address to the Centre for Independent Studies, November 16th 2006,” Centre for an Ethical Society, <http://www.ces.org.au/uploaded/articles/00010.pdf>, dated 4 January 2007, found on 17 January 2007.

²⁰ Hollenbach, *Common Good*, p. 9.

²¹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Although, here and elsewhere, Rawls offers important insights into the relations between a commitment to individual liberty and a commitment to communitarianism (and the common good), it is not my intention to critique his argument here.

²² Manuel Velasquez et al, “The common good,” *Issues in Ethics* 5 (2), Spring 1992, available at <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/commongood.html>, found on 23 May 2007.

²³ Byron, *The Power of Principles*, p. 152.

local church autonomy; and they have regarded political, economic and social activism as minor concerns compared to evangelism and mission (understood as seeking the spiritual conversion of the heathen or indeed other non-Baptists). Key Baptist strengths such as individual soul liberty, freedom to interpret Scripture according to conscience, resistance to authoritarian hierarchy and pronouncements, and an other-worldly emphasis in piety and proclamation all potentially conspire against the common good.

Historically Protestant Christians have approached social issues in three main ways.²⁴ First, the High Church tradition, largely representing the theological successors to the Oxford Movement of the 1830s, articulated the *incarnation* of Christ as the prism through which they addressed social issues. Key proponents of this stream are B.F. Westcott, Bishop of Durham from 1890 to 1901, and William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II.²⁵ Second, the broadly liberal Modern Churchmen of the early twentieth century, drawing on the theology of Albrecht Ritschl, emphasised the *kingdom of God* as the paradigm for an ideal society. Activists such as the Congregationalist minister Fleming (“Flaming”) Williams and scholars such as Alfred E. Garvie, Principal of the Congregationalist New College, London, represent this stream.²⁶ Third, the evangelical emphasis on the *atonement* of Christ for sin has greatly influenced the approach that evangelicals have taken to social issues. British church historian David Bebbington notes that “Evangelicals might differ over details of theology or points of church order, but all their differences were overlaid by a common belief that the world was impregnated with wickedness from which human beings had to be saved. This conviction coloured their attitude to all the affairs of life.”²⁷ It is not surprising that this evangelical emphasis on personal sin as the underlying cause of social evils underlies or informs many of the public statements and sermons of NSW Baptists throughout the twentieth century.

The Great Reversal

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw extraordinary contributions to social reform by evangelicals, the best known of whom are John Wesley, the Clapham Sect (led by William Wilberforce), Lord Shaftesbury, and Charles Finney. But, beginning in the late nineteenth century and increasing in the period immediately following World War I, a shift occurred within evangelicalism, described by American historian Timothy L. Smith as “the Great Reversal.”²⁸ Social justice and social action ceased to occupy the minds and burden the consciences of many evangelicals. They turned into ostriches, ignoring the secular implications and civic responsibilities of their message. Liberal Protestants and Catholics became the recognised leaders of Christian social reform, while evangelicals were understood to focus almost exclusively on “soul-winning.”

In a sermon on the return of Christ in 1877, Chicago evangelist D.L. Moody said, “I find that the earth is to grow worse and worse ... I look on [it] as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a life-boat, and said to me, ‘Moody, save all you can.’ ... This world is getting darker and darker; its ruin is coming nearer and nearer; if you have any friends on this wreck unsaved, you had better lose no time in getting them off.”²⁹ Or as a radio evangelist of the early twentieth century put it: “I don’t have time to clean up the cesspool; I’m too busy fishing in it!”³⁰

In his classic apology for social concern, John Stott identifies the main reasons for this reversal as a reaction to theological liberalism and the so-called “social gospel” which (among other things) confused the kingdom

²⁴ David Bebbington, “Evangelicals, theology and social transformation,” in David Hilborn (ed.), *Movement for Change: Evangelical perspectives on social transformation* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), pp. 2-4.

²⁵ See, for example, B.F. Westcott, *The Incarnation and Common Life* (London: Macmillan 1893); and William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (London: Pelican Books, 1956 [1942]).

²⁶ See, for example, Garvie’s *The Christian Ideal for Human Society* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1930).

²⁷ Bebbington, “Evangelicals, theology and social transformation,” p. 3.

²⁸ Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980 [1957]), p. 212. See also David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal: evangelism versus social concern* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1972).

²⁹ Dwight L. Moody, “The return of our Lord,” in William G. McLoughlin (ed.), *American Evangelicals, 1800-1900* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1968), pp. 184-185.

³⁰ Source unknown.

of God with a “Christianised” social order; disillusion and pessimism in response to the horror and evil of total war; the influence of premillennialism and its passive acceptance of the growth of human evil prior to the return of Christ; the rise of the culturally conservative middle classes whose members often identified Christianity with their suburban culture and values; and the notion that Christianity and political action should not mix.³¹

Similarly, Richard Mouw argues that, during the twentieth century, evangelicals have tended to react to the onslaught of pluralism, relativism and scientism by weaving together three interrelated strands of thought:

first, a remnant ecclesiology in which the true church is seen as a cognitive minority; second, an apocalyptic eschatology that understands the larger culture as heading toward destruction; and third, an antithetical epistemology that insists on a radical difference between Christian and non-Christian interpretations of reality.³²

In short, during the twentieth century, evangelical Christians have tended to become preoccupied with the limitations of their relatively small numbers and reacted by taking pride in what they assumed was their privileged spiritual status. At times they have taken on a fatalistic, and perhaps careless, attitude to the world around them. They have certainly felt threatened by some of the ideas and ethics espoused by non-Christian people, and have responded by attacking, resisting or ignoring them. These factors led others to perceive evangelicals as irrelevant or at best marginal to the life of the world, and led evangelicals to withdraw from engaging with many of the world’s problems.

When evangelicals did attempt to address social problems, their focus on personal sin and moral absolutism resulted in a tendency to denounce what they identified as wickedness,³³ to apply negative solutions to the problems they confronted, and to adopt a policy of intransigence whereby their stringent demands for reform were “immutable, sacrosanct, certainly not open to negotiation.”³⁴ This style of social engagement carried possible risks including, first, the danger of clamour (“a bellicose tone, an inflated rhetoric and exaggerated charges ... [stiffening] resistance among opponents ... [and offering] a poor advertisement for Christianity”³⁵); second, the danger of distorting the gospel by associating it with a form of law; and third, the danger of appearing disloyal to the supernatural dimension of the gospel by emphasising its social dimension.³⁶ As a result, the place of social justice in the mission of the church has vexed evangelical Christians for most of the past century.

Nevertheless, as Brian Stanley has observed, “the Church must stand for something in the world, or it will be swept aside as meaningless.”³⁷ Indeed a church that does not reflect God’s heart and will for unredeemed social systems and structures, as well as God’s heart and will for unreconciled persons, is a church that God may well sweep aside as meaningless to his saving purposes. The great danger for so-called Left- and Right-motivated movements for Christian social justice is that they will perpetuate the adversarial rhetoric and destructive divisions of the past (both political and religious) rather than embrace a wholistic vision and strategy for justice and peace in our world. Where are Baptists positioned with respect to these threats and

³¹ John R.W. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (fourth edition; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), pp. 29-33. See also David J. Bosch, “In search of a new evangelical understanding,” in Bruce J. Nicholls (ed.), *In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Responsibility* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1985), especially pp. 71-76.

³² Richard J. Mouw, “Evangelical ethics,” in Mark A. Noll & Ronald F. Thieman (eds), *Where Shall My Wond’ring Soul Begin? The Landscape of Evangelical Piety and Thought* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 78.

³³ For example, slavery, alcohol consumption, gambling, Sunday desecration, extra-marital sex, and certain doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

³⁴ Bebbington, “Evangelicals, theology and social transformation,” pp. 4-10; quote p. 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

³⁷ Brian Stanley, “Christian mission and the unity of humanity,” in Geoffrey R. Treloar & Robert D. Linder (eds), *Making History for God: Essays on Evangelicalism, Revival and Mission in Honour of Stuart Piggin, Master of Robert Menzies College 1990-2004* (Sydney: Robert Menzies College, 2004), p. 387.

opportunities? Should our understanding of Christian mission embrace a moral or social dimension? Do we stand for something in the world?

The common good and Baptists in New South Wales

As an evangelical Protestant denomination founded in 1868 (taking its current name in 1870), the Baptist Union of New South Wales closely reflects David Bebbington's four evangelical descriptors of biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism.³⁸ Critics might say that the denomination has at times extended its commitment to biblicism to a position bordering on bibliolatry.³⁹ Australian Baptists in general, and NSW Baptists in particular, were pietistic and evangelistic in the practice of their faith. Many NSW Baptists would agree with the principle that "the soul of reform was the reform of the soul."⁴⁰ Yet on the whole, throughout the twentieth century, they clearly accepted that their Christian responsibility did not end at the regeneration of individuals but extended to the reformation of society.⁴¹ While NSW Baptists professed a well-defined Protestant piety and expressed an extraordinary evangelistic zeal (through personal witnessing, gospel preaching, and foreign missions), they also possessed a strong desire for social reform. That this desire was often narrowly focused, and occasionally decried, does not deny its abiding presence.

There are several ways in which this could be illustrated. The period from 1945 to the present is significant due to the escalation of social change in Australia; the growing diversity of the denomination as it grew numerically and responded to different religious traditions and theologies; the broad range of social issues addressed by NSW Baptists; changing attitudes toward alcohol consumption, empire loyalty, Sunday observance and state aid to private schools; the new structures established (such as the Baptist Homes Trust, Baptist Community Services, Australian Baptist World Aid, counselling services, Baptist Inner City Ministries (now Hope Street), and the Centre for Christian Ethics); and the importance of assessing the ongoing tensions between evangelism and social justice, and between private and public religion, evident throughout the century.

Instead I have examined denominational Assembly and Executive Committee records from 1895 to 1945 to identify how they addressed social issues, the structures established to do so, and the rationales articulated for social engagement during a period of significant social turmoil and change, and a period in which the present conservative evangelical culture of NSW Baptists was already well established. Significantly, these dates traverse the whole period of the Great Reversal, as well as the long reign of dispensational premillennialism as a theological worldview and virtual test of orthodoxy in NSW Baptist circles.

In terms of structures to address social issues, NSW Baptists were poorly served. Between 1895 and 1945 the notion persisted that the Social Questions Committee (and its predecessors) was a "poor relation" of the more popular and evangelistically-focused Committees of the Union (notably the Executive, Evangelism, Foreign Missions, College, and Young people's Committees). For some it was a luxury. For others it was a distraction from what had become the historic priority of evangelism and mission – "a dangerous irrelevance

³⁸ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 3ff; "activism" in contrast to nominalism in matters of religion rather than social or political activism.

³⁹ For example, a divisive and in some respects anti-intellectual debate on the nature of biblical authority raged among NSW Baptists through the mid-1970s, culminating in a new doctrinal confession in 1979 which defined Scripture as "the infallible Word of God." The denominational college, Morling College, which has attracted significant criticism by theological conservatives in the past, now overtly embraces a conservative evangelical orientation and has as its slogan, "Taking God's Word to God's world."

⁴⁰ R. Broome, *Treasures in Earthen Vessels: Protestant Christianity in New South Wales 1900-1914* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1980), p. 9.

⁴¹ Recently federal Leader of the Opposition Kevin Rudd articulated a broad social justice platform drawing on similar biblical and theological principles as those enunciated by earlier generations of NSW Baptists. In particular, Rudd abhors the "privatized, pietised and politically compliant Christianity" popular today. See especially Kevin Rudd, "Faith in politics," *The Monthly*, October 2006, pp. 22-30, originally delivered as a public lecture at Whitley College, the Baptist Theological College of Victoria.

to the Church's unique mission of saving souls."⁴² NSW Baptists were also poorly organised and resourced to address social issues, although this was ameliorated by the presence and erudition of key leaders.⁴³ It remains debatable whether and to what extent the various resolutions and public interventions actually influenced the development of public policy and the welfare of the community.

But the range of social issues debated at Assemblies and in the Executive Committee, and the consistency with which they appeared throughout the period, is extraordinary. From 1895 to 1945 the Baptist Union of NSW passed no less than 241 resolutions on social issues.⁴⁴ Arranged by subject and frequency, the results are telling:

⁴² Bruce Mansfield & Desmond Hope, "Protestant Australia today," *The Bulletin*, 10 June 1961, p. 15.

⁴³ In particular, men such as Revs Ebenezer Price, Frederick Hibberd, F.E. Harry, William Higlett, Thomas Porter, A.J. Waldock and James Barker, and Messrs W.H. Ardill, H.J. Morton and William White.

⁴⁴ Resolutions of Assembly and Executive Committee are listed together here since the latter was regarded "as the Assembly between Assemblies," and was not inclined to express views divergent from those of Assemblies.

TABLE 1

<i>Social issue</i>	<i>No. of resolutions</i>
Alcohol and other drugs	62
War, empire loyalty and conscription	38
Sabbatarianism	30
Gambling	27
Religious liberty, church and state	15
Immigration, refugees and overseas aid	12
Censorship	11
Employment, industrial relations, welfare	9
Race issues	7
Boxing	7
Marriage and divorce	5
Sex, prostitution and sexually transmitted infections	5
Roman Catholic Church	4
Dancing	3
Scout movement	1
Criminal justice	1
Ethics in politics	1
“Vigilance man”	1
Social service department	1
Artificial insemination	1

This data invites several observations. First, although the list includes procedural as well as principle/policy resolutions, the number of resolutions passed on social issues suggests a significant and abiding interest by NSW Baptists.

Second, while only four years (1926, 1928, 1932 and 1934) recorded no resolutions on social issues, peak and trough periods are discernible. In particular, the years 1910-15 and 1938-43 registered extraordinary numbers of social-issues resolutions, and both periods were preceded by periods where relatively low numbers of resolutions were passed (1905-1909 and 1923-1937). David Bebbington has noted what appears to be a similar cooling of interest in social issues among conservative evangelicals in Britain during the interwar

years; he attributes this in part to the progress of premillennialism and Keswick doctrine, ideologically justifying otherworldliness.⁴⁵ Certainly the dualism and separatism of dispensational premillennialism had a significant – and largely unresearched – impact on NSW Baptist ministry and mission for a long time, although this was waning by the 1960s. For many it was an accepted part of the culture, but for others dispensationalism presented a major threat. For example, the influential Sydney-based editor of *The Australian Baptist*, Alan Prior, had this to say in 1951:

This movement is led by individuals who believe that we are living in an era when the Church is predestined to be apostate. According to the particular view, commonly called “dispensationalist,” which they impose on Holy Scripture, nothing good can be expected in our time. Believing on *a priori* grounds that there can be no movement of the Spirit in this generation, such movements as presume to be inspired by the Spirit are denounced as anti-Christ and apostate.

What is required of true Christians is to abandon the traditional Christian churches, just as Paul desired the Christians in Corinth to leave the company of pagans when he said, “Come ye out from among them and be ye separate.”

According to the view of this particular group, the surest mark of Christian insight and of the working of grace in a Christian, is his capacity to discern error in other Christians and his resolve to have nothing whatever to do with them. Maintaining that the whole secular order is doomed, that God has no interest in it, and that the sooner evil reaches its climax the better, Christians should feel no responsibility whatever for this world.

Here is the projection into the Christian realm of that nihilism which has been rampant in the world of our time.⁴⁶

It is significant that, although several leading dispensationalist ministers sat on the Social Questions Committee, the peculiar emphases of their eschatological system appears to have had little impact on the Union’s advocacy of social justice. The cycles in the frequency with which social issues were addressed may be attributed to various political, social and organisational factors, but certainly suggest that the imminence and onset of total war prompted NSW Baptists to greater vigilance on social reform. For example, usually resolutions addressed up to four kinds of issues, but in 1915, 1939 and 1940 NSW Baptists passed resolutions on seven or eight different kinds of social issues.

Third, four subject areas stand out as the key social issues addressed by NSW Baptists in the half-century: alcohol, war/empire, sabbatarianism, and gambling. These account for 157, or 65 per cent, of all social-issues resolutions passed in the period. Further, alcohol prohibition was easily the most popular issue, accounting for more than 25 per cent of all social-issues resolutions.

Fourth, while today political statements are often tempered or silenced by party political divisions, before 1945 NSW Baptists expressed unity and confidence in their political affinities with imperial Britain. This was most evident in frequent formal expressions of loyalty to the British throne and King, unquestioned (though not unqualified) support for British wars, and passionate denunciation of Britain’s political and religious enemies. At the time, Britain seemed an expressly Christian power, and its King the defender of democracy and religious liberty – values NSW Baptists were keen to affirm.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ David W. Bebbington, “The decline and resurgence of evangelical social concern 1918-1980,” in John Wolffe (ed.), *Evangelical Faith and Public Zeal: Evangelicals and Society 1780-1980* (London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 192-194.

⁴⁶ *The Australian Baptist* (hereafter *AB*), 27 Jun 1951, p. 2.

⁴⁷ On Australian Baptists and politics see Ken R. Manley, “Defending ‘the freest land in the world’: Australian Baptists and political Protestantism (1918-32)” in Geoffrey R. Treloar & Robert D. Linder (eds), *Making History for God: Essays on Evangelicalism, Revival and Mission in Honour of Stuart Piggin, Master of Robert Menzies College 1990-2004* (Sydney: Robert Menzies College, 2004) 133-150.

Fifth, issues relating to sex account for only five resolutions (2 per cent), although this does not include resolutions on film censorship. Matters of sexual behaviour, even clothed in terms like “social purity,” were often regarded as inappropriate for mixed or churchly conversation. Further, widespread contraception was unavailable, discouraging many from promiscuous and premarital sex.

Sixth, in contrast to more recent campaigns on social issues, none of the 241 resolutions passed between 1895 and 1945 mentions environmental issues, or “life” issues such as abortion and euthanasia, or smoking. Moral perspectives are often socially and culturally rather than theologically conditioned, although the specific moral issues of the day certainly rested on theological and biblical foundations as well as drawing on socio-cultural wellsprings. The complete silence of NSW Baptists on smoking may be attributed to the fact that prominent ministers during the period smoked (pipes), and that their most generous benefactor, Sir Hugh Dixson, made his considerable fortune as a tobacco importer.⁴⁸

Wowsers or social activists?

Many Australians regarded NSW Baptists as wowsers. Fashioned by the Sydney *Truth* in 1899, the term ‘wowsers’ was frequently used to disparage conservative moralists, highlighting the deep social divisions raised by alcohol, gambling, dancing and other leisure pursuits. Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey observes that, “to many Australians, the wowsers were killjoys and spoilsports but in the eyes of others they were evangelical reformers fighting on a wide front.”⁴⁹ Indeed they were. Wowsers also attracted criticism because it was claimed they were miserly, and taxes on products of which they disapproved were used to subsidise the war.⁵⁰ NSW Baptists were drawn to address conservative moral issues for various reasons. Indeed social reform in Australia “was the outcome of a movement of social concern fed from many sources and representing many opinions about the proper goals of human society.”⁵¹

These sources are often ill-defined. Records left by earlier generations of Baptists indicate the significant issues, and often recommend policies, but their underlying rationales are not usually clearly stated. In particular, for a denomination whose primary authoritative guide was the Bible, and whose fundamental article of faith was the biblical *kerygma*, it is ironic that its leaders rarely articulated biblical or theological arguments for social-issues resolutions.⁵² Instead they appealed, implicitly more often than explicitly, to public aspirations (such as the common good, civic morality, strengthening the “Christian” empire) or fears (such as poverty, disease, defilement, family dysfunction, despotism, decline of empire, and withholding of divine blessing). More generally, the non-conformist emphasis on piety, morality and frugality may have stemmed from a desire by free settlers to eliminate vestiges of the culture that had arisen in the hard and heady days of the penal colonies and gold rushes. Understandably, NSW Baptists also advocated social reform to protect their own children and young people from the ravages of an increasingly secular and amoral society. This was especially pertinent in wartime, when travel brought new opportunities and experiences, and where “unhealthy pleasures” delivered comfort, relief and oblivion from suffering and fear.⁵³

There are three representative sources for rationales underlying social-issues resolutions passed by NSW Baptists between 1895 and 1945: Presidential and Union sermons, occasional papers by clergy and lay

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon: Daily Life in a Vanished Australia* (Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 314. That Dixson, a “faithful Baptist,” sold tobacco was for Blainey “an indirect sign that the minor religious sects did not oppose smoking.”

⁴⁹ Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon*, p. 355. For a typical caricature from 1918 see “The killjoy’s prayer,” in Keith Dunstan, *Wowsers*, p. 6. See also Simon Sleight, “Public spaces? Sydney’s wowsers and the spatial conception of decency, 1901-1912,” *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 90 (1), 2004, 75-93.

⁵⁰ Dunstan, *Wowsers*, p. 5.

⁵¹ J.D. Bollen, *Protestantism and Social Reform in New South Wales 1890-1910* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1972), p. 24. Bollen relies substantially on news and denominational periodicals to support his thesis, but does not cite Baptist documents.

⁵² This applies also to the overwhelming NSW Baptist opposition to ecumenism, as I have argued elsewhere. See Rod Benson, “Disavowing ecumenism: The fundamental reasons for NSW Baptist opposition to conciliar ecumenism 1945-1965,” unpublished paper, 2006.

⁵³ It was also evident in times of severe economic depression such as the 1890s and early 1930s.

leaders, and minutes of official meetings. The minutes record four statements that shed light on rationale. Three are Assembly resolutions; one is the report of an Assembly address. Though few in number, they are significant. First, the 1905 Assembly unanimously resolved that

the solution of all social and economic problems is to be found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which aims at the regeneration of the individual nature, and through practical application of Christian principles to every department of human life to establish the Kingdom of God upon earth.⁵⁴

This resolution identifies the mission of God's people as the regeneration of individuals *and* the reformation of society. Second, the 1907 Assembly put its faith in legislative initiatives to deliver social change, addressing causes not symptoms:

... it is incumbent upon the Church of Christ to take serious note of the fruitful social evils which exist in our midst and to devote its energies to the securing of drastic and effective legal measures for the removal of the causes of these evils. [This Assembly] recognises that interests of momentous value are involved – not only of a material but of a spiritual order. And, further, these causes are largely under human control. It therefore wishes for the Public Morals Association and kindred agencies Divine blessing and large success.⁵⁵

Third, in 1909 Rev Charles Pickering, pastor of the Balmain (Sydney) church, presented an address on "The Church and social problems" to the Half-Yearly Assembly, the following report of which was published in *The Baptist*:

[b]ehind all the achievements of civilization, all the miracles of science, all the developments, the progress of politics, and the questions of religion there was, in nine out of ten men, a seething spirit of unrest, a fierce murmur of discontent, and an acute sense of civil injustice. There was no doubt that there was a consuming desire for social reform ... The best of social reformers had no quarrel with Christianity but with the churches, because of their inertness with regard to the social betterment of those who were struggling with adverse conditions.

One gleam of hope in the social outlook was that there were associated with the agitation for reform, men of unquestioned Christian character. Sweating in business shops, the senseless extravagance of those on top as contrasted with the poverty, degradation and misery suffered by those at the bottom of the ladder, were things which ought to make every man think.

It was this condition that had given rise to the social problem. They were not convinced, however, that nationalisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the transformation of private and competing capital would achieve the desired results. Was human nature more to be trusted from a moral standpoint in the aggregate than in the unit? The evil at the root of things lay deeper than in an economic mistake, in a wrong method of commerce or trade, or in industrial unfairness. Sin lay at the root of all our troubles – social and economic. If social reformers could reach their social ideals to-morrow without the eradication of sin they would be upset in less than a week.

The great fault [Pickering] had to find with the socialistic scheme of reform was that it failed to recognise the necessity of the moral reconstruction of human nature as a prerequisite to the successful reconstruction of human society and of the social order. Were human nature what it ought to be, and what under God it might be, the evils of which so much was heard and seen would not exist. They

⁵⁴ Minutes of the Annual Assembly of the Baptist Union of NSW (hereafter AA), 27 Sep 1905, p. 21. Moved Rev J. Barker, seconder unknown. Barker's motion was in reply to an outstanding Presidential address by Rev Charles Lane, "Socialism: The human and the divine," printed in the Baptist Union of NSW *Handbook 1905-6* (Sydney: Baptist Union of NSW, 1906), pp. 12-21.

⁵⁵ AA, 27 Sep 1907, p. 167. This resolution too was carried unanimously.

believed that if men would simply carry out the great law of Christ, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,” wrongs would cease, and men would dwell in peace and comfort under any political system ... The cure for the world’s ills was to be found in the efficacy of the Cross of Christ and [the] recreative power of the Divine Spirit.⁵⁶

Fourth, in establishing the Social Questions Committee, the 1927 Assembly defined its brief as moralistic, cooperative and in defence of the common good. Its purpose would be:

to take steps to counteract or suppress the numerous social evils which menace the highest welfare of the Community, acting in co-operation with other similar Committees as may be deemed advisable, and generally to promote the well-being of the Community.⁵⁷

Summary

Although there is a discernible shift from action to reaction, influenced in part by the dualism and separatism of dispensational theology, it is clear that, in the fifty years to 1945, NSW Baptists understood their mission to be both the regeneration of individuals and the reformation of society. Their passion for the spiritually lost and devotion to evangelical theology were accompanied by a vision for the common good, the just society, and the virtuous life. As Rev Ebenezer Price said in 1894, “the disciple of Christ who neglects to fulfil the function of a social reformer – to be a vindicator of outraged human rights – and who fails to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, to weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice, has failed to grasp some of the elementary lessons taught by the Master, and is responsible for seriously misrepresenting both His Spirit and His words.”⁵⁸ Such a vision is now in danger of being lost through the crushing pressures of secularism, dualism, individualism and postmodernism.

It is also apparent that, while NSW Baptists were poorly organised and resourced to properly and comprehensively address social issues, this weakness was ameliorated by the presence, political awareness and erudition of key leaders. In the interwar years, while NSW Baptists almost universally embraced the theology of dispensational premillennialism, and many pursued a so-called Keswick spirituality, the attendant “Great Reversal” of interest in social responsibility was arguably less apparent in NSW than it was in other parts of the evangelical world. NSW Baptists consistently displayed the evangelical distinctives of biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism, but their corresponding commitment to social justice suggests that it should be considered, along with John G. Stackhouse Jr’s transdenominationalism,⁵⁹ as an essential descriptor of evangelicalism today. Indeed this proposal is supported by the experience of NSW Baptists in the years after 1945, as global evangelicalism took hold in Australia, in an environment of unprecedented wealth creation matched by phenomenal support of global aid and development projects by evangelical Christians in Australia and in many other places.

The common good and the missional church

In response to rapid social change and encroaching religious pluralism, many theologians and missiologists have emphasised the need for strategic renewal of mission, often by way of new models and programs

⁵⁶ Minutes of the Half-Yearly Assembly of the Baptist Union of NSW (hereafter HA), Apr 1909, p. 258. Edited transcript of an address to a public meeting at the HA, pasted into Minute Book by the Secretary of the Union, Mr Charles Lane. See also the 1908 Presidential address by Rev W. Montague Cartwright, “Our work in the light of to-day,” in *Handbook*, 1908-09, pp. 26-36, especially the section titled “Social influences,” pp. 31-33.

⁵⁷ AA, 30 Sep 1927, p. 594. The words after the word “advisable” were written by hand rather than typed, suggesting that the last phrase was added by amendment.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Ken R. Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to ‘Eternity’: A History of Australian Baptists. Volume 1: Growing an Australian Church (1831-1914)* (vol. 1 of 2; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2006), pp. 360-361.

⁵⁹ John G. Stackhouse Jr, “Evangelical theology should be evangelical,” in Stackhouse (ed.), *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), pp. 41-42.

designed for the “emerging” or “missional” church. If, as I have suggested, the common good is integral to Christian mission, it will be instructive to assess whether and how leading advocates of the movement specifically embrace the common good as a motivating principle for mission. To this end, the final section of this paper examines selected recent contributions by Australian church leaders to the conversation on the “missional” or “emerging” church to identify the extent to which they articulate the common good as a motivating principle for mission today.⁶⁰

Dave Andrews, Not Religion, but Love (2003)

In a previous book⁶¹ Andrews sought to recover the vision of Jesus from the “ruins” of Christendom. Here, in popular grass-roots style, he suggests how Christians can realise that vision in communities today, based largely on his own experience leading the Waiters Union, a ministry based in Brisbane, Australia. At the heart of the vision is a Christlike sensibility that struggles “against the powers that conspire against ordinary people realizing their potential.”⁶² Among other things,

Christ calls us to be aware of one another, and the gift of life that everyone else can bring to the community. He calls us to acknowledge not only the reality of our brokenness, but also the potential for wholeness in our relationships, and our responsibility to grow collectively as people, in our capacity to speak truthfully, listen attentively, and work cooperatively, for the sake of the community ...

Jesus created a liberated and liberating space for people to be free, to explore their potential to be the very best that they could be.⁶³

Andrews does not explicitly refer to the common good, but through anecdote and application of Scripture, notably from the Gospels, he builds a compelling argument for the identification of Christian mission with the common good. There are frequent hints that the common good underlies his worldview. For example, “If authentic transformation is to occur, it is absolutely essential that people discover how to resolve their problems together in a way that yields long-term gains for everyone, even if it means short-term losses in the meantime.”⁶⁴

Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, The Shaping of Things to Come (2003)

This scholarly book argues that the church must adopt more incarnational structures and methods for mission, and greater innovation, if it is to flourish in a “post-Christendom” era. The church should move from an institutional to a missional vision; and from an attractional, dualistic and hierarchical mindset to an incarnational, messianic and apostolic approach. The authors broadly define mission as “the very heartbeat and work of God ... [who expresses a] desire to see humankind and creation reconciled, redeemed, and healed,”⁶⁵ but it is evident that spiritual conversion rather than social justice is in view.

Much of the book outlines pragmatic methodological innovations. At one point the authors state that “Jesus is our primary model of mission, and the Gospels are our primary text ... we should read all the writers in Scripture through the perspective of the Gospels ... [because] [t]here is real missional currency to be found in

⁶⁰ Works examined are Dave Andrews, *Not Religion, but Love: Practicing a Radical Spirituality of Compassion* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2003); Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21 Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003); Ashley Barker, *Surrender All: A Call to Sub-merge with Christ* (Springvale, Vic.: Urban Neighbours of Hope, 2005); Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006); and Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006).

⁶¹ Dave Andrews, *Christ-Anarchy: Discovering a radical spirituality of compassion* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1999).

⁶² Andrews, *Not Religion, But Love*, p. 24.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 35; see also pp. 53-56, alluding to Mt 25:31-46.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁶⁵ Frost & Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, p. 18.

presenting Jesus to a needy world.”⁶⁶ Further, Frost and Hirsch advocate the cultivation of an incarnational spirituality grounded in the everyday (“action as sacrament”), including “work among the poor, community groups and causes,” but the outcome is that it sacralises every space and “allows others to join in around a common activity.”⁶⁷ This sounds very much like a non-institutional form of attractional evangelism – biblical and wholesome in itself, but far from the pursuit of justice for the common good.

Ashley Barker, Surrender All (2005)

Surrender All outlines the history and principles of Urban Neighbours of Hope, a missional community working among the poor and powerless in Melbourne, Australia. Barker regards the state of the poor as a barometer for the health of society. Using the *Titanic* as a metaphor, he writes,

Those who are wealthy and comfortable are too busy partying to notice their lifestyle is unsustainable ... Meanwhile so many of the world’s poor face death and discrimination, locked out from the resources and goodwill that could rescue them ...

When we avoid the poor below deck we do so at our own peril. Those of us who have inherited a place on the top deck cannot keep sacrificing those on the bottom rather than changing our lifestyles.⁶⁸

Barker explores how Christians can experience and express the reign of God through radical discipleship, relocating their lives in order to “take poverty personally and be neighbours of transformation and hope, not neighbours of oppression and injustice.”⁶⁹ He regards solidarity with the poor as a key normative theme of Christian discipleship, through which both the poor and the non-poor are transformed, empowered and liberated through the risen Christ: solidarity “speaks of joining our lives together to fight injustice, to have a stake in a common future together. It speaks of being the body of Christ incarnate.”⁷⁰ Barker criticises the “emerging church” for identifying incarnational mission with “common ground” ministries such as water-skiing clubs and pub or café meetings.⁷¹ A genuine commitment to the gospel “requires the righting of wrongs, standing in solidarity with those facing poverty and addressing unjust structures.”⁷² Urban Neighbours of Hope unequivocally engages in mission with the conscious intention of contributing to the common good.

Michael Frost, Exiles (2006)

In one sense *Exiles* addresses the blind spot apparent in *The Shaping of Things to Come* with respect to social justice. The author writes for those “who wish to be faithful followers of the radical Jesus but no longer find themselves able to fit into the bland, limp, unsavory straitjacket of a [Christendom-era] church.”⁷³ Moreover, “the degree to which we adopt a tame and insipid picture of Jesus is the degree to which we avoid the mission to which he has called us.”⁷⁴

What is this mission? Its foundation is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Its locus is incarnational “grace, love, hospitality, generosity.”⁷⁵ Its characteristics include being “a community that does not live for itself, but genuinely serves others,” and “a community of justice, not lip service and phony left-leaning

⁶⁶ Ibid., 112-113.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 144.

⁶⁸ Ashley Barker, *Surrender All*, p. 20.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 91.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 94.

⁷² Ibid., p. 228.

⁷³ Michael Frost, *Exiles*, p. 3.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 49.

pronouncements.”⁷⁶ It is “the service of others, a cause greater than ourselves.”⁷⁷ Frost devotes a quarter of the book to a discussion of oppression and injustice, and how Christians can resist such forces in thoughtful and subversive ways.⁷⁸ Much of this detailed commentary and advice relates directly to the pursuit of the common good – for its own sake and not as a means to an evangelistic end.

Alan Hirsch, The Forgotten Ways (2006)

Here Hirsch, a Melbourne-based missional church leader, offers an academic exploration of the nature of Christian movements as shaped by Jesus and his mission. He writes for missional practitioners, seeking to identify the irreducible elements that constitute “Apostolic Genius” – the energy that imbues such movements. For Hirsch, mission should be the organising principle and central discipline that integrates other core practices of a church.⁷⁹ He affirms the God-centredness of Christian mission, but assumes that readers know what actually constitutes mission. While *The Forgotten Ways* is no doubt a useful manual for innovative church planters, it is in thrall to a zealous pragmatism and fails to explain how and why justice might feature as an essential component of the church’s mission.

Summary

From this small but representative sample, it is apparent that key thinkers and leaders of the “emerging” or “missional” church in Australia – all of whom could be classified as evangelicals – are far from agreed on whether social justice is an essential component of Christian mission. As a term, the common good was not once used by these writers, although several writers referred to qualities or principles that imply a commitment to the common good. There may be several explanations for this. Perhaps they believed they were “preaching to the converted,” and their audiences were either already advocates and practitioners who embraced the common good within their understanding of mission. They may have been insufficiently aware of the strength of Catholic social teaching in relation to the mission of the church. They may have viewed the common good as a corollary to mission rather than as integral to mission. There may be other reasons. The common good is certainly not inimical to a broad conception of mission in evangelical context, as indicated in particular by Andrews, Barker and Frost. It would appear, then, that the emerging church movement could better articulate and employ the notion of the common good as a motivating principle for mission today.

Conclusion

In *Transforming Mission*, the great South African missiologist David Bosch said, “The mission of the church needs constantly to be renewed and reconceived.”⁸⁰ Neither Scripture nor our distinctive heritage calls Baptists to withdraw from the world. The calling is clearly to engage the world, to embrace the world, to love the world. Though sometimes neglected and occasionally suppressed, strategic action on social and ethical issues enjoys strong support among NSW Baptists, has not in practice been understood as optional or ancillary to the missionary task of the church, and should continue to be recognised as an essential feature of Baptist identity and mission. For, ultimately, this mission of which we speak, and in which we participate, is the mission of God to restore the common good of the whole human community through the love and justice of God. As Bosch put it,

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 104.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 128.

⁷⁸ Chapters 9-11, pp. 203-272.

⁷⁹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pp. 46-47.

⁸⁰ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 519.

mission is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus, wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.⁸¹

And as former Stanford professor of religious studies Robert McAfee Brown put it: "God's message is never: Turn away from this sinful world and find me somewhere else. God's message is always: Immerse yourselves in this sinful world that so desperately needs words and acts of healing, and you will find you are not alone, for I am already there, summoning you to help me."⁸²

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⁸¹ Ibid., p. 519.

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