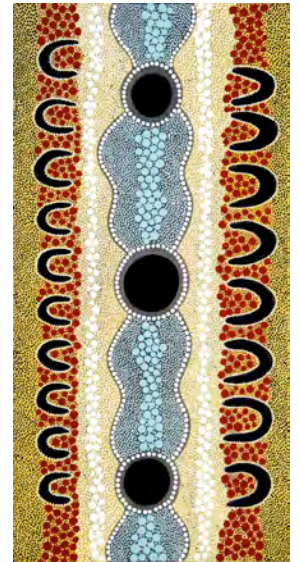


BAPTISTS AND INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

Rev. Graham Paulson¹



Introduction

Most Australians are committed to reconciliation, in principle, but many seem to think that we should now be focussing almost exclusively on the future. A conference on Baptist history provides an important reminder about the significance of the past. We have to be clear about where we have come from, and what we need to repent of, before we can focus on the future with integrity.

Perhaps I should stress that we are here talking about living history. For example, my wife was in her early years compelled to live on a mission reserve in Queensland, she was not allowed to progress her education beyond year 8, and when she worked as a domestic servant in Queensland a portion of her wages were withheld. Those stolen wages have never been recovered, and they are the subject of ongoing legal action.

I was ordained as a Baptist Minister in 1968, the first Aboriginal Baptist to be ordained, but under Queensland legislation at the time a police officer could compel me to live in an Aboriginal settlement, without requiring any legal process. In 1969 when we moved to the NT as missionaries, we soon discovered that one of the senior missionaries there still assumed that Aborigines lived under the 'curse of Ham' of Genesis 9. Racism has been part of our family's everyday experience, whether sanctioned by Genesis, or by

¹ Paper presented at International Conference On Baptist Studies, Whitley College, 17 July 2009. I wish to

Darwin, or by policies that deprived Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders even of the right to vote.

While serving in the NT, one of the Aboriginal men within our congregation was a certain Vincent Lingiari, leader of the Wave Hill “walk off”, and land rights pioneer.² These were the experiences I brought with me into my roles as the inaugural President of the Baptist Union of the NT in 1971, as Principal of Bimbadeen College in the late 1970s (a training college of the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship), and as the first Aboriginal President of the Queensland Baptist Union in 2004.

There are many stories that could be told, but this paper will attempt three things. Firstly, it will seek to show the enormous barriers the social, scientific and political contexts presented to successful cross-cultural mission to Australia’s Indigenous people. Next, in spite of that context, the unique contribution of Australian Baptist individuals and ministries will be examined. And finally, given that history, it will seek to explore what special opportunities might exist to create and construct a ministry that will be effective and appropriate in the twenty-first century.

The Effects of Colonisation

An understanding of Baptist mission to Australia’s Aborigines cannot be achieved without acknowledging the broader context of the history of colonisation and the global factors in that colonisation process. It is axiomatic that meaningful exchanges between the settlers and the Indigenous people could not exist without cross-cultural understanding. Cultural understanding, however, was not the primary ingredient of the colonising, ‘might-is-right’

² For the history of the land rights movement, see especially Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003).

philosophy. Not only was this philosophy so much a part of the reason why the settlers and convicts were here, in the first place, but it also was a philosophy that was affirmed in the global context. The 'might-is-right' philosophy was demonstrated by the international slave trade. It was demonstrated globally in 'social Darwinism', and it was confirmed for some in the church by the theology of the 'Hamitic Curse'.³ Its impact on Aborigines is evident in the way the two societies interacted.

Notwithstanding the tragic history of misunderstandings, it is good to note that Rev. John Saunders set a prophetic tone in the early days of Baptist ministry in Australia. The first Baptist service of worship was held in Sydney on 24th April 1831, more than four decades after the British penal colony had begun in 1788. The first preacher was Rev. John McKaeg who conducted baptisms in Woolloomooloo Bay in 1832. He gathered a motley group around him and a grant of land was received and plans for a chapel were made.⁴ Later, a chapel was built in Bathurst Street, Sydney and a church formed in 1836 under the leadership of Rev. John Saunders. John Saunders exercised a prophetic ministry, and for example, he sounded a warning to the readers of *The Colonist* in 1838:

Let the Hawkesbury and Emu Plains tell their history, let Bathurst give her account, and the Hunter render her tale, not to mention the South... The spot of blood is upon us, the blood of the poor and defenceless, the blood of the men we wronged before we slew, and too, too often, a hundred times too often, innocent blood... We have, therefore, reason to dread the approach of the Lord when he cometh out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity: 'For the earth also shall disclose her blood, and shall no more cover her slain'.⁵

³ John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity* (Sutherland: Albatross, 2nd edn 1994), pp.49, 657-58; for a comprehensive historical discussion, see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁴ Ken Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to 'Eternity': A History of Australian Baptists Vol.1* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), pp.17-35.

⁵ Cited in Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2nd edn 1992), pp.91-92, from *The Colonist* 17, 20 October, 1838. Saunders is quoting from Isaiah 26:21.

In this sermon, Saunders was actually echoing concerns expressed by the Colonial Office in London in the 1830s and 1840s. After the abolition of slavery in the early nineteenth century, and especially after the *Emancipation Act* of 1833, the evangelical reformers focused their humanitarian attention on Aboriginal people in the colonies. In the understanding of these British parliamentarians, the Christian cause was being damaged by injustices done to Indigenous peoples in the name of the empire. Following in the footsteps of William Wilberforce in the campaign against slavery, the leaders were especially Thomas Buxton, James Stephen and Lord Glenelg.

In December 1835, for example, Lord Glenelg expressed a concern to the South Australian colonial Commission, stating that:

Before His Majesty can be advised to transfer to his subjects the Property in any part of the land of Australia, he must have at least some reasonable assurance that he is not about to sanction any act of injustice toward the Aboriginal natives of that part of the Globe. In drawing the line of demarcation for the New Province... the Commissioners therefore must not proceed any further than those limits within which they can show, by some sufficient evidence, that the land is unoccupied and that no earlier and preferable title exists.⁶

It was this kind of caution that lay behind the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 in New Zealand, but the *South Australia Act* of 1834 had already declared that the colony was 'waste and unoccupied'. This particular clause was removed from the *South Australia Act* in 1836, but the underlying doctrine of *terra nullius* remained in place.

Aboriginal existence was recognized, but not ownership of land or resources. Property rights were linked to ideas of "subduing the earth", interpreted largely in terms of

⁶ Quoted in Reynolds, *Law of the Land*, p.106.

farming, and Aboriginal people were legally invisible in that respect.⁷ Moreover, the idea of *terra nullius* was linked to a feudal doctrine of land tenure that recognized only the sovereignty of the British Crown, although in the 1830s the scope of that doctrine of sovereignty was still under construction. The Batman treaty with the Kulin nations in 1835 proved controversial, but eventually the Colonial Office in London decided that the treaty was not an act of the Crown and so it was not valid.⁸

The historian Bain Attwood has recently investigated the inconsistency of British policy in Australia as compared with New Zealand, and his conclusion seems to be that in Australia it boiled down to a case of 'might makes right'. There is no doubt, however, that the evangelical reformers in Britain were motivated by their faith. Following the Select Committee inquiry of 1835-36, Thomas Buxton expressed the view that all native peoples have "an *inalienable* right to their own soil".⁹ Similarly, William Ellis, a representative from the London Missionary Society, said this:

It has been our custom to go to a country, and because we were stronger than the inhabitants, to take and retain possession of the country, to which we had no claim, but to which they had the most *inalienable* right, upon no other principle than that we had the power to do so. This is a principle that can never be acted upon without insult and offense to the Almighty, the common parent of the human family, and without exposing ourselves, sooner or later, to the most disastrous calamities and indelible disgrace.¹⁰

⁷ For an account of the historical background, see Peter Harrison, "Fill the Earth and Subdue it": Biblical Warrants for Colonization in Seventeenth Century England', *Journal of Religious History* 29/1 (2005), pp.3-24.

⁸ Bain Attwood, *Possession: Batman's Treaty and the Matter of History* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2009); Samantha Hepburn, 'Feudal Tenure and Native Title: Revising an Enduring Fiction' *Sydney Law Review* 27/1 (2005), pp.49-86.

⁹ Buxton quoted in Reynolds, *Law of the Land*, p.85. See further Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), pp.7-31.

¹⁰ William Ellis, quoted in Reynolds, *Law of the Land*, p.95 from the *British Parliamentary Papers* 1837, p.510.

It must be acknowledged that there were a number of voices of conscience in the colonies in the nineteenth century.¹¹ One Christian institution was the Baptist Merri Creek School, which began after the members of the Richmond Baptist Church had coaxed some Aboriginal children into attending Sunday school in 1845. The Baptists proposed a full-time school. In 1846 the government granted them the use of a house on the junction of Merri Creek and the Yarra River as a boarding school. The church raised enough money to employ Edward Peacock as teacher. He was regarded as a patient and successful teacher and by 1847 he was introducing what were then progressive ideas on schools for 'Coloured Races of the British Colonies' which had been proposed by James Kay-Shuttleworth, Secretary of the Privy Council Committee on Education.¹²

Twice in 1847 public meetings attended by Melbourne dignitaries were held to display the children's achievements. The Baptist experiment was described in glowing terms, the Peacocks praised, and the intelligence and conduct of the pupils commended. When all but three of the students left later that year, Melbourne Baptists were quick to point out that it was not because the project in and of itself was a failure. On the contrary, the pupils displayed considerable academic aptitude. Baptists were pleased that the school was so well accepted by Aboriginal people, but because of cultural problems the school finally closed in 1850.

The demise of the Merri creek school experiment, despite the best intentions of the pro-Aboriginal Baptists, was construed as a victory to the anti-Aboriginal lobby. The sad irony is that the pro-Aboriginal Baptists had given themselves an impossible dilemma. Desperately anxious to prove conclusively the intellectual capacity and equality of the Aborigines, they attempted to do so by showing that the Aborigines were capable of

¹¹ See especially Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in our Hearts* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998), and Robert Kenny, *The Lamb enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper and the Ruptured World* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2007).

¹² Harris, *One Blood*, p.128.

European civilisation. If we can think of a biblical contrast at this point, the Jews in Acts 15 did not think it necessary to 'Judaize' the gentiles, but it was impossible for Baptists in 19th century Australia to know how to Christianise Aborigines without "Westernizing" them.

One more thing needs to be said about the 19th century. It has often been assumed that slavery was never a feature of the Australian experience, yet some forty years after the British *Emancipation Act*, French officials complained to England that one of its Australian colonies was stealing French citizens from New Caledonia and New Hebrides. Queensland was the focus of this concern, and the practice of stealing Kanaks was known as 'blackbirding'. In the mid-nineteenth century, before the practice of blackbirding was common, a ship sailed up the east coast of Tanna Island in the New Hebrides. My grandfather was picked up out of his fishing canoe in Waisisi Bay and brought to Queensland to cut cane at Bundaberg. He was just a young man at the time and when his canoe washed ashore, his family thought that he had drowned. Ironically, one of the first Acts of the new Australian federation in 1901 was to exclude those very Kanaks, since they offended the White Australia policy.¹³

The White Australia policy grew out of an earlier Social Darwinism that put Aboriginal people so low in the evolutionary chain that even our humanity was questioned. Opinions such as the following were commonplace and newspaper editors, it would seem, happily published them:

Brutish, faithless, vicious, the animal being given fullest loose only approached by his next of kin the monkey...the Australian black may have a soul but, if he has,

¹³ See especially Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the Question of Racial Equality* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008).

then the horse and dog infinitely superior in every way to the black human, cannot be denied possession of that vital spark of heavenly flame.¹⁴

European anthropologists, too, wondered if Australian Aborigines were the missing link between the monkeys and humans. Aboriginal people are still recovering the remains of their ancestors whose graves were desecrated and whose remains were sent to universities in Europe for study.

Missionaries, at least, believed that Aborigines possessed a soul.¹⁵ They were human and therefore capable of salvation. It was on this point, that popular opinion and missionary opinion divided. On many other points, however, Christian views on Aborigines were not clearly distinguishable from those of the rest of the community.

To some missionaries, if Ham was the 'father' of all the black races, it followed that the Hamitic theory could be further applied to include Australian Aborigines. This was the theological counterpart to social Darwinism, combining to confirm a pattern of societal thinking and behaviour that persisted until the social challenge of the late sixties and early seventies. During my first assignment as an associate worker on the mission-field in the early nineteen-sixties, my fellow Aboriginal colleagues and I were made rather acutely aware that one of the senior missionaries working with us was a firm believer in the Hamitic curse and, at that time, he thought it was appropriate to apply to it Australia's Aborigines.

As mentioned above, international policies and practices had a flow-on effect on the attitudes and actions of the Australian colonisers, even into the twentieth century. The policies of protection from 1911-1937 and assimilation from 1937-1967 meant that under the guise of responsibility for the welfare of our Aboriginal people the governments were free to do great damage to Indigenous culture and well-being. Either that, or there were

¹⁴ Harris, *One Blood*, p.30.

¹⁵ Harris, *One Blood*, p.30.

failures on the part of officials to deal with even extreme violence (I heard white people boasting, even in 1971, of participating in the 'culling of Aborigines', and elders have told me stories of how they witnesses massacres first hand). It was under the policy of protection that government agencies forcibly removed Aborigines from their homelands, transporting them several hundreds of kilometres to live on reserves and settlements and stealing any children who were of mixed racial parentage.

The government's White Australia policy further reinforced the perceptions and practices of racism. Aborigines only became full citizens of their own country after the constitutional referendum in 1967. Is it an historical accident that the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship was formed at the end of that same year as the referendum, when there was an encouraging sense that Indigenous people had finally found a public voice, in line with a number of international developments? But we also need to remember that it was still another eight years before the federal parliament would proclaim a *Racial Discrimination Act* (1975), and although the Northern Territory had a *Land Rights Act* in 1976, land rights and native title would still be subject to fierce controversies in the subsequent decades. The legacies of 19th century dispossession live on.

All this means that the gospel, being preached by people from the dominant racial group, was difficult to accept. By the year that the first Baptist Union was established in Australia, 1870, the denominations involved in Aboriginal mission reported a catalogue of failures, but there were to be some notable exceptions in the years leading up to federation.

Baptists in Mission

It was *individuals* from Baptist churches that helped lead Aboriginal mission forward in the era of federation. Two non-denominational missions, grew out of the Christian Endeavour movement, and had their beginnings in the Woollahra Baptist church and the Petersham Congregational church. The first missionary was Miss J Watson, who was soon to be followed by Miss Retta Dixon.¹⁶

A single woman, Miss Watson, feeling the call to live and work within a Sydney Aboriginal Community in 1895, sparked the beginning of a new era in Aboriginal cross-cultural mission. Two of the most influential missions in Australia sprang up out of the work begun by these two women. By agreement the Aborigines Inland Mission (AIM) worked the north and east of the country and the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) worked the west and south of the country. At the peak of missions in the early 1940s, they had over one hundred missionaries between them and more than half of all missionaries on the field. In addition, this number did not include the number of 'Native Workers' within each mission. The AIM called itself an interdenominational mission but in practice excluded those denominations with which it did not agree. And every missionary had to do a 'guide book' course that included the doctrine, principles and practices of that mission. An important point here is that those doctrines, principles and practices, including believers' baptism by immersion, would have been acceptable to any Baptist organisation of the day (and before the AIM was accepted as a denomination, I was told to register my denomination as Baptist at school or if I was in hospital). Baptist churches throughout the country gave the missions strong support. Again the impact of the Baptist contribution was far greater than expected given its size in proportion to the other denominations.

¹⁶ Manley, *From Woolloomooloo Vol. 1*, pp.634-40; Harris, *One Blood*, pp.553-55.

It was during the Second World War that Baptist bureaucracy became involved for the first time. After representation from a Baptist individual, Dr. E. H. Watson, to the South Australian Baptist Union, that Union resolved in 1944 to survey the possibilities for mission in the Northern Territory. Eventually Baptist ministry was begun in 1947 at a settlement later to be called Yuendumu, in the southern region of Warlpiri country. Rev. Laurie Reece, the man in charge of the survey, was still at Ali Curung, another mission station, when I first visited in 1961. The work of the Australian Baptist Home Mission in the Northern Territory was the single biggest Aboriginal mission task undertaken by an Australian Baptist institution, and in particular, the Rev Tom Fleming was to serve the Warlpiri people for 25 years from 1950. Several other churches were established as a result of the post World War II explosion of missionary activity in the north.

Our own contribution began in 1969, when we were based at Lajamanu but visiting other communities such as Kalkaringi, about one hundred and thirty kilometres to the north. On new years day 1971, my family took up residence in Kalkaringi (otherwise known as the Wave Hill township) as pioneer resident missionaries in the new township built by the government.

Revival began among the children, and things moved quickly. A number of them signalled their desire to become Christians, and after they had been counselled they began bringing other children to the mission house. During one Sunday night service, I asked all the children to come out and line up across the front of the meeting. I then challenged the adults to consider their own position, and closed the meeting. Later that night, many came back to the mission house to advise us of their decision to follow the way of 'God the Father' (*Ngatchi*), and my wife and I were counselling people for many hours.

Within a matter of months, there was another movement in the nearby Gurindji camp called Daguragu, previously known as Wattie Creek. An elderly woman named Doris began bringing women to the mission house. It became clear to us that God was blessing her testimony in the camp, and many were turning to Christ. The day before a weekly camp meeting at Daguragu, Doris sat my wife down to tell her a story. She said that God had visited their area the night before. She described how a bright light had come down from the sky, and briefly hovered over each home before moving on to the next one. When the light had visited each place it sped back into the sky. Doris was blind, but her vision proved powerful.

In the evening of the next day we gathered for our weekly fireside camp meeting. There seemed to be a different atmosphere about the place. People seemed to be more serious and quiet than before. Even the dogs were not fighting as usual. At the end of the meeting, I asked the people to think long and hard about the claims of Christ and what the Bible says. To my amazement, the whole meeting seemed to erupt at once with almost everyone trying to touch us to signify a desire to follow Christ. There was a loud and lively chorus of 'I want to follow *Ngatchi, maluka*'. This was not just a case of individual decisions for Christ; this was a people's movement. By the dying light of the central campfire, I prayed that God would keep the desire to follow Christ strong in their hearts until we could talk and pray together in the morning. On our way back to Daguragu in the morning, I was carefully negotiating our vehicle down a steep embankment and across a rocky creek bed when I discovered that another vehicle had deliberately blocked our way. The mixture of frustration and curiosity on my part soon dissipated, when the driver leapt out to inform me that he had not made a decision for Christ the night before, and asked if he could make it now. In the middle of the creek crossing, we led the man to Christ, and that began the events at Daguragu that day. Eventually we began an all age

Christian programme that included about 97% of the two communities, Wave Hill and Duguragu, which were about five kilometres apart.

One of the most important developments to come out of Baptist work in the Northern Territory in those days was in the area of contextualisation. This notion was first signalled by the Rev. Tom Fleming back in 1968 when he involved the community in the 'handover' of land to God for a church building and represented the peoples relationship to God in a stained glass window on which the cross at the centre was surrounded by symbols of various clan groups of the Warlpiri people. This had the effect of affirming the clan system within the body of Christ.¹⁷ While Tom strongly acknowledged the connection between land and culture generally, it seems that he was not as keen to promote the use of local language in the church.

More formally, the subject of contextualisation was the topic of discussion by missionaries as early as 1971, when papers were written, but the concept did not catch the imagination of the people until the mid to late seventies. The process, actioned in concert by all the missionaries on the field at the time, was guided by the Rev. Ivan Jordan and took root in Lajamanu. This was facilitated also through the leadership of one of the local 'lawmen' – a senior custodian of traditional law and custom – Maurice Jupurrula Luther, who was the first person to be baptized at Lajamanu in 1964, and after him Jerry Jangala Patrick. 'The development of the Christian '*purlapa*' [traditional dance] and Warlpiri iconography are two of the most significant phenomena in the history of missions in Australia', writes a reviewer of Ivan Jordan's book, *Their Way: Towards an Indigenous Warlpiri Christianity* (2003). 'The combined impact of the above is such that these Aboriginal people have given new understanding and gained new respect from the

¹⁷ For an overview of Warlpiri culture and the relationships between 'skin', clan and country, see especially Steven Jampijinpa Patrick, Miles Holmes and Lance Box, *Ngurra-kurlu: A way of working with Warlpiri people* (Report 41; Alice Springs: Desert Knowledge CRC, 2008).

family of Baptist churches in Australia', he continues.¹⁸ Another significant cultural factor has been the discovery of the way the existing kinship system can inform styles of worship, leadership and ministry. These have resulted in greater involvement, participation and ownership of the church in the community. For example, it is 'skin' relatives who participate directly in baptism ceremonies, not just the pastor.

It may be an oddity within Baptist history that there has often seemed to be more excitement about the use of Christian Warlpiri iconography and *purlapa* (ceremony or 'liturgy') than about the use of the scriptures in Warlpiri translation.¹⁹ Baptists have characteristically placed more emphasis on the Word than on ceremony.²⁰ In traditional Aboriginal ceremonies, however, there is a high value placed on the maintenance of the correct sacred words, and this cultural expectation raises a number of problems that will be discussed below.

The issues facing *urban* Indigenous people are slightly different from the contexts where traditional law and custom are still strong, such as among the Warlpiri and Gurindji. In 1988, at the Baptist Unions' annual conventions along the eastern seaboard, delegates were asked to consider the establishment of a special ministry to urban Aboriginals. The Baptist Union of Australia soon considered the requests that were passed on from the state Unions and from the Australian Baptist Missionary Society, our

¹⁸ See <http://www.cdu.edu.au/cdupress/books/their-way.htm>, summarizing the book's contents when it was published by Charles Darwin University in 2003.

¹⁹ it is the work of Steve Swartz, along with his leading co-translator Jerry Jangala Patrick, that lies behind the Bible Society translation *Yimi-nyayirni-wangu kaatu-kurlangu* (Canberra: Bible Society in Australia, 2001). Swartz's Warlpiri-English dictionary is available on the web at <http://livinglanguages.wordpress.com/2006/07/16/warlpirienglish-dictionary/>

²⁰ Analogies between the Christian Eucharist and Indigenous ceremony were conceived more easily within the Lutheran missions. See especially, T.G.H. Strehlow, *Central Australian Religion: Personal Monototemism in a Polyotemic Community* (Bedford Park: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1978), pp.27, 34, 60; Barry Hill, *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession* (Sydney: Vintage, 200 pp.49 and 437; cf. Jürgen Moltmann, 'Ancestor Respect and the Hope of Resurrection' *Sino-Christian Studies* 1 (2006), pp.13-36.

mission agency responsible for Aboriginal work. In the ensuing discussion some felt that urban Aboriginal work was the responsibility of the urban and country churches, since this was not considered to be cross-cultural ministry. After further consultation with the Northern Territory field, the Baptist Union of Australia established the Aboriginal and Islander Baptist Council of Australia in 1991 (AIBCA). This ministry, through partnership with the respective state Unions, saw the establishment of Aboriginal churches in Brisbane and Perth and the emergence of new church leadership including the ordination of two Aboriginal pastors, Mark Kickert and Keith Truscott. The work closed down in 2001, although my understanding is that further ministries are still being considered.

Historic Challenges for Aboriginal Mission

Whether in remote areas or in urban areas, Baptists have been at the forefront of contextualisation of the gospel into Aboriginal communities. The work of contextualisation that has been done so far has largely been done in the area of the acculturation of processes of worship and styles of ministry. On these issues, I want to make three comments.

Firstly, these initiatives have been valuable because Aboriginal people for centuries have relied on ceremonies and song to maintain the mythology of their animistic religion, using classical sacred vocabulary. For each story, the ceremonial process and their appropriate actions do remain critical to the maintenance of the myth. The use of ceremonies, and classical language, to embody the gospel stories corresponds to cultural expectations, but also raises certain difficulties.

Secondly, the message of the myths has been locked into the vocabulary of an ancient, classical expression, and publicly available translations into the common

community expressions of today are not permitted. This has led to problems with acceptance and use of Bible translation work in some of our Aboriginal communities. The translator is sometimes very dependent on the perceptions of the native speakers, and they, depending on their Christian maturity and personal experience, might make use of both common and classical vocabulary to translate what they perceive to be a biblical concept. This leads to complications that need to be negotiated within the Aboriginal community.

Thirdly, in each tribe, there are clan or kinship groups that are allocated the responsibility for perpetuating selected stories and performing the appropriate rituals. These are classified as the owners and custodians of their respective traditions and as such retain authority over all ceremonial obligations. Consequently, in the first instance, when the missionaries brought the gospel to the Aboriginal community, they were considered to be the owners of the stories. The books from which they read contained the appropriate language of the story, and as the authoritative interpreters, they had control over all the related ceremonies. We might even suggest that Protestant missionaries against their intentions, have acquired the kind of honour that was accorded to medieval Catholic bishops, which is at least an irony – if not a departure from Baptist theology of the church. To the extent that Aboriginal people carry the new spiritual stories within the old cultural expectations, therefore, there may be a problem with pouring ‘new wine into old wineskins’. The version of this parable in Luke 5:39 also throws up the troubling possibility that the goodness of the ‘old wine’ has not been appreciated as it might. In spite of the good work already undertaken in a number of denominations on the acculturation of Christian ceremony and ministry, we need to do more. We need to do

more work on exploring redemptive analogies between the biblical texts and Indigenous cultures.²¹

Beyond ceremony and ministry, there is an urgent need for the church to engage in Indigenous theologising. For example, the Bible devotes its first few chapters to creation. It begins with a cosmogony, and not enough work has been done on the relationship between Aboriginal cosmogony and the full breadth of biblical creation theology. There is an understandable reticence to do this when Aboriginal cosmogony and cosmology are part of ancient sacred traditions. Moreover, these sacred traditions are secret, known only to traditional Elders, and the number of Christian Indigenous leaders who are also traditional Elders is decreasing – although there are a number of Warlpiri people in this position.

There has been negligible encouragement from the mainstream Baptist church to embark on this journey, but it must be undertaken. Cosmogony and cosmology are the prime movers of Aboriginal society. Most other aspects of Aboriginal culture derive their place and importance from the manner in which they preserve and protect Aboriginal cosmogony, cosmology and values. Thus, the cultural aspects of ceremony and ministry lose their relevance unless they are anchored in Indigenous beliefs, customs and values, yet these all need to be understood as reflecting the presence of God in Australia before the arrival of Christian missionaries.

The church in Australia is one of the great agents of change for Indigenous people, but change cannot be valued for its own sake.²² What kind of theology will allow people's identity to be authentically Aboriginal and authentically Christian?²³ Unless this question

²¹ The idea of 'redemptive analogies' was promoted in the influential books by Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1974) and *Eternity in their Hearts* (Glendale, CA: Regal, rev. edn 1984).

²² See the important collection of essays in Peggy Brock (ed.), *Indigenous Peoples and Religious Change* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

²³ Graham Paulson, 'Towards an Aboriginal Theology', *Pacifica* 19 (2006), pp.310-322.

can be answered with integrity, the church faces the danger of being seen as just another Western social institution that contributes, by default, to our cultural genocide.

Baptists have made a significant contribution to the history of Indigenous mission. But outside of Warlpiri and Gurindji country, the question of what it means to be an Indigenous Baptist *church* in Australia has barely begun to find an answer. The body of Christ will always be multi-cultural, or culturally 'hybrid', but it also needs to be local and incarnational. Such a local identity, far from cloning North American or European models of the church, will be unique to Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. We need to turn redemptive analogies into redemptive practicalities.