

We recently had the privilege of conducting an email interview with Steve Grose. Steve is well-known in western Australia as a conservative evangelical teacher and preacher. After teacher training and then completing theological training in 1984, Steve has planted two churches, and pastored 3 other churches before coming to his current church, the Newcastle Baptist Tabernacle, which he has pastored since 1996.

We sought this interview with Pastor Grose because we believe that his perspective as a conservative Baptist in the midst of a group of Baptists which is clearly sliding toward liberalism is useful for Southern Baptists today to understand.

SBC Today: Tell us in summary the history of the Baptist churches of New South Wales (NSW).

Our heritage as Baptists in Australia is primarily from the English Baptists. Spurgeon's son and students were the main source of ministers for planting and establishing Australian Baptist Churches. My own church has historical connections in architecture, history and ethos to Spurgeon's Tabernacle in London.

Around 120 years ago the Particular Baptists and the General Baptists merged in New South Wales to form the Baptist Union of NSW. That brought the number of Baptist churches to about 40, by 1930 there were 100 Baptist churches, and by 1965 there were 220 churches, and by 1990 there were 300 churches.

Baptists have never represented more than 1% of the population.

Our iconic national poem says:

<i>I love a sunburnt country, Of rugged mountain ranges, I love her far horizons, Her beauty and her terror Core of my heart, my country! When, sick at heart, around us But then the grey clouds gather, The drumming of an army,</i>	<i>A land of sweeping plains, Of droughts and flooding rains. I love her jewel-sea, The wide brown land for me! Her pitiless blue sky, We see the cattle die And we can bless again The steady soaking rain.</i>
--	--

This has been the history of Baptist churches in Australia. There are very brief times of wonderful inspiration where the Lord has moved in very briefly and very sporadically in revival, usually on a small group here or there. But the usual is the drought. Years of slow growth here and there. Sometimes new churches formed from splits, and from the 60's until the 90's very few were intentionally planted (7).

For the last 25 years our membership has remained stable between 18,000 and 21,000 members of Baptist churches in NSW. Very few are converted in from outside (except in those very few brief sporadic times). We have about 350 churches in NSW, the largest

having about 350 in attendance, 90% having less than 100 members and 50% less than 50 members.

Our years of greatest growth were between 1920 and 1960, when our theological college was conservative. During the 60's and 70's denominational leadership was transferred to the more moderate and liberal groups within our union of churches through our theological colleges. During the 80's no theological college lecturer would affirm the inerrancy of scripture.

Since then our churches have steadily become more moderate, more liberal and more charismatic (the charismatic tends to fill the vacuum when the moderate churches discover an apathy and listlessness affected by their lower view of the Scriptures). Our moderates, sensing the need for growth have tended to follow the Hybels model.

SBC Today: In what spiritual state are the Baptist churches there now?

Well I guess it would be fair to say that our Baptist denomination is very mixed. There are some strong conservative evangelical churches. Most of these utilise to some extent blended worship, contemporary and traditional, often with two or three different sorts of worship styles in two or three different services.

We have the classic Willow creek version usually pastored by a moderate pastor with pragmatic church growth methodology.

We have the Emergent church here: the lecturer in preaching at our college, Mike Frost, has written some of the classic texts in this group.

We have the more liberal group who follow a Barthian line, usually denying essentials of the faith.

We have the whole spread of charismatic church here within the Baptist Union, varying from a mild Hillsong style all the way through to "child prophets" and "turn your fillings into gold".

We have the ultra Calvinists that only fellowship amongst themselves.

It would be fairly true to say that no Baptist church in Australia is really much like any other, they are all varying blends of the above basic forms.

I pastor a church in Newcastle is the Northern city of the Newcastle Sydney Wollongong basin. It is 2 hours drive North of Sydney, but the city of Sydney now extends that far.

There are 5 million people in the Sydney region, with Newcastle having 600,000 of that 5 million. There are about 7 million people in NSW, the most populous state of the 20 million total Australian population. Queensland (North of New South Wales) has about 4 million;

Victoria has about 3 million people. The rest are scattered across the 4 other states.

Australia is about the land size of the USA, but the central regions are desert and uninhabitable.

The Sydney region has about 200 Baptist churches and there are about 320 Baptist churches in the State of New South Wales. This works out at about 1 church per 30-40,000 people. These churches are divided between charismatic (about 25%) Conservative Evangelical (about 30 %) moderate (about 35%) and liberal (about 10 %), all within the one denomination.

In our region the number of conservative churches of any denomination would total about 20. Half of our Baptist churches in this region would be liberal-moderate, or extreme charismatic.

In the Sydney area itself the Anglican churches are majority conservative evangelical and number about 300 churches, which means there would be about 350 maybe 400 churches of any denomination that are evangelical.

Of the Australian population less than 10% attend church weekly, and less than 2% attend an evangelical church of any denomination. Baptists account for about 1% of the total population and they are divided into the four sub groups mentioned above. The vast majority of Australians are secular in their world view, with approximately 70% having a belief in God mixed with various secular and New Age concepts.

The State to our South is Victoria, where there are 180 churches. There are very few conservative churches in Victoria. The vast majority would view themselves as charismatic moderates, with some extreme charismatics, and some extreme liberals.

To our North is the State of Queensland which was a conservative state, but now the churches tend to be dominated by charismatics of varying extremes.

SBC Today: What do you believe are the spiritual or theological causes of these problems?

I believe the spiritual causes go back to the effect of moderate theological college lecturers in the 60's to 90's that contended for soul liberty in order to protect their positions. Many pastors adopted their broader theological approach which affected the life of the churches in NSW. Where the Bible was not held to be inerrant, there was little commitment to personal Bible study in the churches. A lack of foundation here has meant that there has been a lack of foundation for doctrine, ecclesiology and spirituality.

Let me give you an example: Richard Foster talks about visualisation techniques in his book *A Celebration of Discipline*. This was actively promoted during the final year of my theological education. Visualisation in order to have direct revelation from God. The entire college, lecturers and students, practised this over a three days spiritual retreat at the college. Ask yourself what this indicates about the sufficiency of scripture, the nature of revelation, and the nature of the spiritual life of the believer. It reveals a lack of confidence in the Word of God as the sufficient revelation of God, and opens one up to mysticism in the place of an eroded confidence in the scriptures. The eroded confidence

in the scriptures is a consequence of lecturers who personally endorsed and affirmed higher criticism of the scriptures.

I would say that there have been some wonderful Bible teachers and preachers in our denomination. There still are. However, at the same time alongside the conservatives there has been a continual fascination with mysticism and alignment with the charismatic movement in some of its excesses that reflects a basic loss of moorings in the Inspired Word of God.

Bottom line, a loss of confidence in the Word of God and the God of the Word.

“Purpose Driven Life” (PDL) campaigns are impacting our churches. The churches are not discovering new ways of worship, or new methodologies to replace the outdated. In many regards the Purpose Driven life is actually giving people more Bible than they have actually ever had before in our more moderate churches. Sadly though the success of the PDL campaigns reflects that the authority for what the church now believes has shifted.

“It has shifted from the infallible Scriptures to psychological and sociological experts, opinions of the masses, trends of the moment and the philosophy of pragmatism.” as Gary Gilley notes.

In interviewing over one hundred candidates for pastoral ministry and ordination, I would conclude that the greatest need is to ensure that these men are truly converted, have a regular quiet time reflective of a true relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, that their theological education be adequate to deal with the issues of the day from a conservative evangelical theological understanding.

SBC Today: In your view, what is biblical ecclesiology and how important is it to maintain biblical ecclesiology?

Wikipedia says “In Christian theology, **ecclesiology** is the study of doctrine pertaining to the Church itself as a community or organic entity and with the understanding of what the "church" is — ie., its role in salvation, its origin, its relationship to the historical Christ, its discipline, its destiny (see Eschatology) and its leadership. It is, therefore, the study of the Church as a thing in itself, and of the Church's self-understanding of its mission and role.”

I would say that a biblical ecclesiology flows firstly from a biblical understanding of Christology and its relationship to the individual’s salvation. As Hebrews 2:1-4 says:

We must therefore pay even more attention to what we have heard, so that we will not drift away. For if the message spoken through angels was legally binding, and every transgression and disobedience received a just punishment, how will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was first spoken by the Lord and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him.

At the same time, God also testified by signs and wonders, various miracles, and distributions [of gifts]from the Holy Spirit according to His will.

The role of the church is revealed by its relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ. This of course means there should be a regenerate church membership, which of course is voluntary church membership (signified by believer's baptism) united around common beliefs and practises. This viewpoint leads to respecting the autonomy of the local church in discovering the will of the Lord Jesus Christ in the function of that churches mission in evangelism and discipleship (Matt 28:18-20).

Of course, the scriptures give us the parameters for biblical ecclesiology (1 Timothy 3:15 "But if I should be delayed, [I have written]so that you will know how people ought to act in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.").

In other words, our Christology produces our anthropology and our Soteriology which of course in turn produces our ecclesiology, which becomes practical in our Baptist Distinctives.

SBC Today: How is congregational rule practiced? Has this changed over the years?

Currently there is a big push on for the rule of the local church by congregational government to be negated.

Firstly, the rights of the congregation over their buildings was negated by the passing of a vote at Convention allowing the Title deeds of each church to be held by an elected group from the Baptist Union of NSW, called the Property Trust. This group takes away the problems of electing from each congregation trustees for the properties of each church. My experience and that of many pastors is that it is more difficult dealing with the Property trust than any other bureaucracy. Some churches employ lawyers to deal with the Property trust to do small alterations on their buildings. The Property Trust was then made permanent trustees of each church property through an act of NSW State Parliament. No church owns its own property. The Property trust of the Baptist union is now the owner

Secondly, the "Leadership Team" (currently dominated by what the SBC would class as theological moderates) of our Baptist Union have brought out a fellow from the American Baptist Churches to teach them the idea of governance. Basically, the leadership of the Union will appoint pastors to churches. If they don't measure up to their criteria, that pastor will be sacked by the leadership of the union and replaced with someone else. This has been attempted in at least one church of recent days with disastrous results.

Currently, although churches have the right to select whomever they will as pastor, the leadership of the Union restricts the list of names to those which it wishes to give to the church.

A capable conservative friend of mine was left off all lists and his name not given to churches who would have sought to call him. I placed his name with an “Evangelical” church (a church plant by Sydney Anglican evangelicals in a liberal high church Anglican diocese) in order to see him continue in pastoral ministry.

SBC Today: What was the first sign that Baptism by Immersion was being lost?

The issue of Open Membership has been a catalyst for minimising the significance of Believer’s Baptism. The idea of Open membership includes a range of options:

- i. Full open membership (whoever wants to turns up at a church meeting to vote on anything),
- ii. Associate membership (where full membership requires believer’s Baptism, but voting on any issue can be conducted by anyone the church deems fit to be admitted to membership whether baptised by immersion as a believer or not)
- iii. Partial associate membership (where full membership requires believer’s Baptism, but voting on any issue except land, building or call of pastor, can be conducted by anyone the church deems fit to be admitted to membership whether baptised by immersion as a believer or not).
- iv. There could be other parameters placed upon membership other than faith in the Lord Jesus Christ confessed in believer’s baptism, such as affirmation of the church’s statement of belief’s.

I guess the issue of open membership in Baptist churches in the state of NSW became a question in the late 70’s. One Australian state had always practised open membership (where anyone could vote on any issue raised at a Baptist church meeting just by coming along to the meeting). Some churches in NSW practised the second tier of membership for those not baptised by immersion, Associate Membership. Then in the late eighties the idea came about that we should accept these associate members into full membership. So ways were sought to do so. Finally it was noted that in our Act of Incorporation of the Baptist Union of NSW with the state of NSW, that there was a loophole, and basically it was announced at our Convention by our legal advisor that option iii above was possible legally by State Law.

Since that time those who are for Open Membership have pushed that line with membership by contacting adherents of those churches having closed memberships (membership by believers baptism, or letter of transfer) and telling them “their rights” that being baptised as an infant is ok and should be respected as long as the person gives credible evidence of conversion.

SBC Today: Has the doctrine of the security of the believer degenerated over the years and when did you first notice this doctrine loosing its perspective?

Historically, the Particular Baptist churches joined with the weaker and more theologically diverse General Baptist (Arminian, sometimes Wesleyan) churches in Australia around 1890. By the 1930’s A.W. Pink got broadsided by the Baptist Union of

NSW, in his pastorate in Sydney, for being ultra Calvinistic. However, whilst being generally Arminian in theology, they were more baptistic by adhering to the security of the believer. Due to moderate influences from Southern [Baptist Theological] Seminary in the 60's and 70's our lecturers tended more to a Wesleyan view of theology. So much so that a Nazarene pastor friend complained to me once that there was no place in Australia for Nazarenes because all the Baptist pastors were really Nazarenes!

I was surprised that many Baptist pastors had surrendered the idea of the security of the believer. This came out at an ordination committee meeting where I and three others (the Principal of the Theological College, and two vice Presidents) were interviewing a candidate who said he didn't hold the security of the believer. I was the only one in the group that did. Their concerns were pragmatic. They knew people who had fallen away (I agree with Adrian Rogers that the faith that fails was faulty at the first). The high rate of falling away among Baptist ministers in NSW (as well as church members) probably reflects the moderate/charismatic mix that was promulgated in our seminary and in our churches from the 70's until now. I have had significant leaders of the AOG say to me that they have an 80% fall out rate out of their churches. Rather than adjust their concerns to biblical theology, we all have a tendency to adjust our theology to what we are seeing, unless we hold a high view of scripture. Pastoral failure through immorality, alcoholism and drug abuse is a regular feature of our Australian Baptist landscape. For this reason, many pastors have abandoned their belief in the security of the believer.

SBC Today: What other doctrines that are unique to Baptist have you seen eroding over the years?

Mark Dever believes the debate over gender issues reflects crucial trends dictating the theological direction of denominations. He writes:

Dear reader, you may not agree with me on this. And I don't desire to be right in my fears. But it seems to me and others (many who are younger than myself) that this issue of egalitarianism and complementarianism is increasingly acting as the watershed distinguishing those who will accommodate Scripture to culture, and those who will attempt to shape culture by Scripture. You may disagree, but this is our honest concern before God. It is no lack of charity, nor honesty. It is no desire for power or tradition for tradition's sake. It is our sober conclusion from observing the last 50 years.

I would concur that with the acceptance of the ordination of women in Baptist churches there has been a subsequent (and consequent) widening of theological parameters. Virtually any theological position is now widely acceptable within our denomination, provided that there is some Big Name who substantiates the position.

For instance, some years ago Denton Lotz, with Theowald Lorenzen, publicly in the newspapers endorsed the idea that there is no difference between Catholicism and Baptists except in regard to some insignificant items of ecclesiology. This statement and

his approval of the Barthian group in Australia has given rise to a new wave of universalism within our Baptist churches. Consequently, a Barthian Universalist was elected President of the Baptist Union of Australia.

One quarter of our churches endorse the teachings of Benny Hinn.

This year Hillsong promoted TD Jakes and Ed Young, Jr. on the same program under the title of *Unity*. It will now become more acceptable in our Australian Baptist churches to reject the doctrine of the Trinity, or see it as optional.

This widening of the tent has occurred due to the allowance of the autonomy of the local church in acceptance of the role of women as senior pastors.

The only position that would be widely derided would be the premillennial position.

SBC Today: What would you recommend to Southern Baptists as they consider their own future?

Seek Revival at the hand of the living God, and expect that revival will always bring you back to the Sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour and the Sufficiency of the Word of God as our authority. We need pious hearts and well taught heads.

SBC Today: How do you respond to those who think that the ordinance of believers-only baptism is a divisive matter?

Theologically, to abdicate our belief in Believer's baptism is to abdicate our soteriology in the long term and negate our Baptist Distinctives in the short term. It is they who are being divisive through their lack of understanding of the integrity of our Christology, soteriology and ecclesiology, that is, they all hang together.

It's like a great woolly jumper (not a jumbuck): its all knitted from one long piece of wool. If you pull one thread, in measure you pull all the rest as well. Sooner or later you wind up with a big mess of wool in your hands, and no jumper!

Someone might say, "Ahh its ok, I'll tie a knot in it! I wont allow some other more important doctrines to go with it" Well and true, but what's to stop the guy down the road from untying the knot in it? You don't have power to stop him from doing what you fear he will do.

It's much easier to just hold the whole packet, than to try and figure which pieces you don't need and can jettison. Besides, did the Lord give you the right to rewrite His Word? Did He appoint you as the person who can determine which pieces of His Word we can negate? Then we better be real careful of Rev 22:18:

I testify to everyone who hears the prophetic words of this book: If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book. And if

anyone takes away from the words of this prophetic book, God will take away his share of the tree of life and the holy city, written in this book.

SBC Today: What do you think is the most important lesson that Southern Baptists in the United States could learn from the Baptists of New South Wales?

Ligon Duncan wrote last year:

The denial of complementarianism undermines the church's practical embrace of the authority of Scripture (thus eventually and inevitably harming the church's witness to the Gospel). The gymnastics required to get from "I do not allow a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man," in the Bible, to "I do allow a woman to teach and to exercise authority over a man" in the actual practice of the local church, are devastating to the functional authority of the Scripture in the life of the people of God.

By the way, this is one reason why I think we just don't see many strongly inerrantist-egalitarians (meaning: those who hold unwaveringly to inerrancy and also to egalitarianism) in the younger generation of evangelicalism. Many if not most evangelical egalitarians today have significant qualms about inerrancy, and are embracing things like trajectory hermeneutics, etc. to justify their positions. Inerrancy or egalitarianism, one or the other, eventually wins out."

I would agree that those who, whilst proclaiming themselves "defenders of the faith", promote a rejection of the clear direction in 1 Timothy 2:12 "I do not allow a woman to teach or to have authority over a man;" directly undermine the authority of the scriptures.

If you allow this undermining of the authority of the scriptures, then you will also find an increasing diversity of non-evangelical views will follow along in the train.

The issue of women's ministry has often been used as a ploy for widening of parameters in conservative churches to include greater theological, spiritual and moral diversity. Ask yourself, do you want a Clinton or a Criswell to set the direction for your denomination? Which one of these has a clearer theological, spiritual and moral compass?

SBC Today: If you could speak at the national gathering of the Southern Baptist Convention, what would you want to say?

Stand by your guns as Southern Baptists. Why be known for anything that you are not.

You believe God's Word? Then don't be ashamed of that belief.

You believe the Lord Jesus is the Saviour? Then don't be ashamed of the gospel.

The gospel is truth. It is the power of God to salvation. The extra stuff of pragmatic preachers might drag a few extra bottoms on seats, but in the end what you use to catch a guy you gotta use more of to keep a guy. If the Gospel is from God, then rely on Him and preach that!