



The Whitley Lecture 2014  
**Always on the way  
and in the fray:**

Reading the Bible as Baptists

Helen J. Dare



Foreword by Sally Nelson

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## THE WHITLEY LECTURE

The Whitley Lecture was first established in 1949 in honour of W.T. Whitley (1861–1947), the Baptist minister and historian. Following a pastorate in Bridlington, during which he also taught at Rawdon College in Yorkshire, Whitley became the first Principal of the Baptist College of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia, in 1891. This institution was later renamed Whitley College in his honour.

Whitley was a key figure in the formation of the Baptist Historical Society in 1908. He edited its journal, which soon gained an international reputation for the quality of its contents – a reputation it still enjoys nearly a century later as the *Baptist Quarterly*. His *A History of British Baptists* (London: Charles Griffin, 1923) remains an important source of information and comment for contemporary historians. Altogether he made an important contribution to Baptist life and self-understanding in Britain and Australia, providing a model of how a pastor-scholar might enrich the life and faith of others.

The establishment of the annual lecture in his name is designed as an encouragement to research and writing by Baptist scholars, and to enable the results of this work to be published. The giving of grants, advice and other forms of support by the Lectureship Committee serves the same purpose. The committee consists of representatives of the British Baptist Colleges, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, BMS World Mission, the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship and the Baptist Historical Society. These organizations also provide financial support for its work.

In this beautifully crafted lecture Helen Dare offers us the creativity and durability of the Bible as a text that can withstand a variety of interpretations without being intrinsically compromised. She points us to some of the issues over which scripture appears to say different things to different people (women in ministry, sexuality, communion, baptism etc) and identifies this group interpretive process, so historically characteristic of Baptist church life, to be dynamic, creative and life-giving rather than threatening. We are a people 'on the way and in the fray', and through this we may find truth.

Drawing on Brueggemann's analysis of orientation and disorientation in scripture, Helen invites the reader to think of the relationship with God as one that necessarily exists in the tension of unresolved human problems. Under the ups and downs of life lies the bedrock of the faithful God, to whom Israel turns in disbelief and despair to ask 'Why?'. It is this God to whom we also turn as Baptist congregations in our dilemmas of interpretation. It may be an uncomfortable journey, holding both faith and doubt, but this is the only way to read scripture as a community.

Helen ends with a plea for a resumption of our radical approach to Scripture. Let us read it 'naked', without the notes and commentaries, and let us read it together so that we can hear what God might be saying in a new generation.

Helen Dare studied Classics at Regent's Park College and later embarked on ministerial formation at South Wales Baptist College. Her PhD on Baptist hermeneutics is from the University of Bristol. Helen was born in Newport, South Wales, and is joint minister with her husband Ben at Broad Haven Baptist Church in Pembrokeshire. She enjoys reading, exploring the coastline and mountains of Pembrokeshire, music and singing, and cooking for friends.

Sally Nelson  
Secretary, Whitley Lectureship Management Committee

## **‘Always on the way and in the fray: Reading the Bible as Baptists’**

I begin with two very brief stories.

Firstly, at a regional denominational ministerial selection meeting in 2003 an interviewer asked: ‘*My Bible states that women should not teach or hold authority in church. If you hold to that same Bible, how do you account for that?*’ Although this woman was presenting herself for ministerial formation, within a Baptist Union that officially claims to welcome and affirm women in ministry, she was confronted by a member of the panel who read the Bible in such a way as to preclude women from serving as ordained ministers.

Secondly, at a Bible study group in which the topic was whether the church should change its constitution to allow the potential to appoint a female minister, one (also female) member of the group addressed the female ministerial student present: ‘I can’t explain it. I like to listen to you preach, but there’s just something in me that says that preachers should be wearing a suit and tie!’ The commentator gave voice not to a biblical objection as such, but a cultural one.

The theme of this lecture does not begin with the debate concerning women as ministers, nor is this subject its major concern. Rather it considers the way in which a particular hermeneutical context, understood as being ‘on the way and in the fray’, is creative for Baptists engaging in communal biblical interpretation. For what follows however, these stories are illustrative of the diversity present within many Christian communities. Often there will be represented

different combinations of experience, education, social context, gender, ethnicity, relationship status, health, language, age.

This has had consequences for biblical interpretation in three contexts. Local churches such as those who have always had a male minister are prompted to hold discussions concerning whether they would consider calling a woman, while recent legislative change has placed discussions concerning marriage and human sexuality on the agenda of many churches. Communities of faith turn to biblical texts as they wrestle with these issues, and often discover a diversity of interpretative opinion. Secondly, it can be observed at the denominational level, with churches, ministers and congregants holding differing interpretative views within the same Baptist Union. Throughout the history of Baptist Churches in the United Kingdom, churches have differed on matters such as who is to be admitted to communion, on Calvinism, christology, and the ordination of women.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, in an academic context, the discipline of biblical studies has

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<sup>1</sup> For a historical overview of these controversies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the 17th Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983), pp. 18-21, and Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the 18th Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1986), pp. 20-23, 129-30. On the specific area of christology see Stephen R. Holmes, 'The Dangers of Just Reading the Bible: Orthodoxy and Christology', in *Exploring Baptist Origins*, ed. by Anthony R. Cross and Nicholas J. Wood (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2010), pp. 123-37, and on the debate in the twentieth century, Ian M. Randall, *The English Baptists of the 20th Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2005), pp. 365-82, and Nigel G. Wright, 'The Dr. G.R. Beasley-Murray Memorial Lecture 2012: Sustaining Evangelical Identity: Faithfulness and Freedom in Denominational Life' (Lecture delivered 5 May 2012 at the Baptist Union Assembly, London). On the ordination of women see Simon Woodman, *The Story of Women in Ministry in the Baptist Union of Great Britain* (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2011).



started to take account of this diversity with the development of reception theory and history and reader response criticism.

Individuals wear varying lenses when discussing issues such as ordination, communion or sexuality, but crucially for our subject, they turn to the same scriptural texts in the search for answers. When a group of individuals come together as church, the community must decide how it will approach the diversity that is generated. They may embrace it willingly, or fear its potential for causing division. For those of the latter opinion, interpretative diversity can additionally be seen as an inconvenience, particularly for the community's leaders, because it can be disruptive to personal relationships and viewed as a distraction from a focus on mission.<sup>2</sup>

A community that fears the implications of diversity may find a top down response appealing, in which only certain interpretations are designated as acceptable. Those dissenting would be required to keep their opinions private or leave to join a different community of faith sharing their views. This pressure can be exerted explicitly by statements of belief or strong leaders, but more often takes the form of an implicit expectation of uniformity, which results in a fear of

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<sup>2</sup> Although this lecture is concerned with the implications of interpretative diversity in a communal aspect, it also has the potential to upset personal equilibrium. Many university students of theology experience this when they meet alternatives to long cherished interpretations which are presented by tutors as preferable, more theologically acceptable, or are simply found to be more personally persuasive than those of home church or family. One aspect of the work of the University and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) is to support students experiencing this. See for example, Greg Bannister, 'Staying Christian while Studying Theology', <<http://www.theologynetwork.org/studying-theologys/staying-christian-while-studying-theology.htm>> [Accessed 15 January 2014].

causing trouble or standing alone. Not only does this approach expect clear black and white interpretative conclusions and fail to take account of the grey area of questioning and searching as individuals consider different options, but it creates considerable turmoil for the individual who must internalise their struggle or suppress questions or dissent if they are to remain in community.

For leaders, the inconvenience of diversity is in this way removed, but it comes at considerable cost. The summary resolution of interpretative diversity to uniformity is at the cost of relationship: firstly with each other in the community of faith, when the opportunity is lost for walking together and deepening relationships through the challenges of interpreting an ancient sacred text in the twenty-first century; secondly relationship with God can be diminished because the robust and honest approach exemplified by the psalmists is deemed inappropriate, and hence suppressed; and thirdly, relationship with the world (namely those beyond the community of faith) is jeopardized because Christians lose the ability to engage with the messy reality and diversity of life that is the experience of many both within and beyond the church.

It was in relation to this third context of relationship with the world that I became aware of the creative potential of the work of American Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. In his *Message of the Psalms*, he writes: 'It is a curious fact that the church has, by and large, continued to sing songs of orientation in a world

increasingly experienced as disoriented.’<sup>3</sup> We will return shortly to ‘orientation and disorientation’, but the implication is clear: churches are effectively putting their fingers in their ears in order to shut out the complexities of life. This insight can, of course, be applied most directly to hymnody and the complaint that lament has been excluded from the contemporary repertoire in many contexts. I, however, would like to consider it in relation to the way in which scripture is interpreted, particularly within Baptist communities.

In what follows, my aim is not to resolve contemporary interpretative debates. I do not have quick fix solutions for local churches or Baptist Unions as they struggle with diversity. Nor do I seek to impose a particular interpretative strategy that will generate ‘Baptistic’ interpretations as opposed to, for example, Roman Catholic or Anglican ones.<sup>4</sup> Rather I propose to re-examine the theological basis of our interpretative or hermeneutical context, which I believe may generate a space rich with possibility for engaging interpretative diversity creatively rather than destructively. I propose that the premise on which this rests is God’s relatedness to his people, and

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: a Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> Some work has been done on the Baptist reception of particular texts. See, for example, Beth Allison Barr et al., *The Acts of the Apostles: Four Centuries of Baptist Interpretation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009); Mikeal Parsons, ‘(Early) Baptist Identity and the Acts of the Apostles: Hermeneutical Insights from the *Baptists’ Bible Project*’, in *The ‘Plainly Revealed’ Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice*, ed. by Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011), pp. 3-29; Simon Woodman, ‘The Plain and Literal Meaning of the Text: A Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist Perspective on Revelation 20.1-7’, in *The Way the World Ends? The Apocalypse of*

therefore it is necessary to consider the biblical roots of the covenantal interpretative context. I will do so using the work of Walter Brueggemann, not because I think his work is the last word on the matter, but because it offers a lens through which to view Baptist hermeneutics and an analytic vocabulary with which it may be discussed.<sup>5</sup> The lecture has two parts: firstly, an introduction to some relevant insights concerning the covenantal context from Brueggemann; considering the relationship between Israel and God, or ‘faith in the fray’, and then looking at walking together in that relationship, or ‘faith on the way’. In its second part, the lecture will propose a way of understanding Baptist biblical interpretation which is informed by the preceding presentation of Brueggemann’s work.

### ***Faith in the fray***

Brueggemann understands Israel’s experience of relationship with God to be complex. The biblical text gives voice to a variety of pictures of the way in which God relates to Israel and the way in which Israel responds to God. For example, he identifies in Israel’s experience a cycle of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. Brueggemann’s tri-partite classification of the psalms according to this pattern is perhaps the work for which he is best known. Psalms of Orientation express the settled feeling that results from knowing that

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*John in Culture and Ideology*, ed. by William John Lyons and Jorunn Økland (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), pp. 186-210.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann is not a Baptist, but his work is evocative of many themes which have been present throughout British Baptist heritage, such as a dislike of coercive

all is well-ordered and understandable. Life in these Psalms is uncomplicated and unthreatened by the chaos that ensues when it seems that God's control over circumstances is questionable. Theologically their function is to offer praise for God's actions and being.<sup>6</sup> The repetition of such psalms creates amongst the community a world assured of God's power, control and trustworthiness.

The counter-voice, or countertestimony, to this is the psalms of Disorientation. These speak of the confusion and worry felt when disaster happens, and yet they display a relationship with God in which no question or accusation is out of bounds. On the contrary, addressing God *in extremis* was a necessary part of dealing with the incongruity of disorientation since, when orientated existence broke down, God had a case to answer. There were questions of justice and truthfulness to be dealt with: why were God's righteous people suffering? What about the promise of faithfulness made by God to his people when they felt abandoned?<sup>7</sup> For Brueggemann, disorientation cannot be 'cured' by human effort. On the move from lament (or plea) to praise within the psalms he comments: 'Whatever it [sc. the intervention between the two elements] was, it must have had a

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power; a willingness to dissent from the status quo; and a commitment to the depth of divine and human relatedness.

<sup>6</sup> An example would be Psalm 19 which opens with a declaration of creation faith (v. 1) and is marked by an emphasis on regularity, with the psalmist noting the passing of time and the rising and setting of the sun (vv. 2, 6). It is God's law that gives a framework for life; his commandments are perfect, sure, clear, true and righteous (vv. 7-9): it is by keeping them that God's people will be assured of their innocence and subsequent reward (vv. 11-13).

<sup>7</sup> A well-known example would be Psalm 13 which questions God's hiddenness and forgetfulness (vv. 1-2) and requests God's help so that his enemies will not be vindicated (vv. 3-4). It includes the usual move to praise in verses 5-6.

profound emotional, as well as theological, impact on the complainer, for a whole new world of trust and gratitude is entered into in that moment.<sup>8</sup> He also comments on the importance of ‘being present in the hurt, by waiting in the hurt with honest speech and open grief, waiting and waiting, until the turn that is strangely given, but never forced’.<sup>9</sup>

It is this turn that is ‘strangely given’ that identifies Brueggemann’s final category: the psalms of New Orientation, that express thanksgiving and praise for the specific deeds of God. They function to keep alive the freshness of relationship with God. They remind people of God’s goodness and invite others to share in the story for themselves, for rather than those in positions of power simply announcing that God is good, the whole community is drawn into retelling the story of deliverance. In the singing of New Orientation, the generalised claims of orientated certainty become personalised and

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<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, p. 57. Such a move may have followed a spiritual experience or perhaps an interjection by another community member, but almost certainly finds its place in a theology that confidently expects God to respond to a call. It would be easy to imagine that the transition follows on from a change in circumstance, and some believe that it is dependent on the interjection of a salvation oracle that has subsequently been lost. For Westermann, however, it is not necessary for a miracle to have happened before such confident words may be spoken: ‘That which is yet to come, the turning point in the situation must of necessity follow. Therefore it can now already be regarded as realized’. Heard petitions are ‘a powerful witness to the experience of God’s intervention, intervention that is able to awaken in the one lamenting, while his sorrow is materially unchanged, the jubilant praise of the God who has heard the suppliant and come down to him.’ (Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), pp. 80, 81.)

<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 131.

verified: God does help in times of trouble, and can be said to have just done so.<sup>10</sup>

Many Christians find the expression of disorientation in the text of scripture disconcerting. Some of these texts are left out of lectionaries and preaching plans because of embarrassment at the strength of emotion that they contain, and particularly that such words should have been directed at God.<sup>11</sup> Christians prefer attitudes of reverence and devotion in their relationship with God, which have often been interpreted as a requirement of passivity and politeness at all times.<sup>12</sup> The result of this belief is a requirement to internalise disorientation for fear that others will suspect a loss of faith, or at least

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<sup>10</sup> Psalm 48 is a communal example of these psalms, with its celebration of God's work and wonder at the beauties of the holy city, Jerusalem, which confound kings advancing in hostility. The personalised element can be seen in a phrase such as 'as we have heard, so we have seen' in verse 8. In individual thanksgiving, Psalm 18 witnesses to the new orientation after rescue. The psalm is replete with vivid details of the trouble faced by the psalmist, followed by specific verbs describing God's action such as 'reached down', 'drew me out', 'delivered' (vv. 16-19). It climaxes with a great outburst of praise: 'The Lord lives! Blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my salvation' (v. 46).

<sup>11</sup> On the psalms of disorientation omitted from lectionaries and the effect this has on corporate worship, see Lyn Fraser, *Prayers from the Darkness: the Difficult Psalms* (New York: Church Publishing, 2005). Reflecting on a congregation's communal and public response to the violent death of a fifteen year old church member, Matthew Boulton comments: 'We did not lament – not at that service, nor the following Sunday morning, nor any morning since. I have no doubt that outside the sanctuary many of us did lament, that in the face of such terrifying nonsense many of us gazed, rebuked, despaired, and that some of us do still – but this lamentation we did and do on our own, not amidst a congregation, and not typically, I would guess, in any recognizably liturgical form. Whatever rage, whatever anguish, whatever 'loud cries' we have made over this boy's death we have made alone. As a church, the psalm of our suffering has been the twenty-third.' (Matthew Boulton, 'Forsaking God: a theological argument for Christian lamentation', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 55.1 (2002), 58-78 (p. 58).)

the existence of doubts, and that God will be insulted by such impertinent questioning. However, as Brueggemann highlights, countertestimony is not an act of unfaith. Rather it is an expression of the utmost trust and evidence of deep faith in the relationship with God. It is *because* Israel believes that God will be faithful that she turns to him when the evidence appears to be different. Israel knows that God is moved when his people suffer and so makes a fervent, and to our ears daring, appeal to God. ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’ cries the psalmist; giving voice to a series of tortured wrestlings as he attempts to reconcile his present sufferings with the belief of God’s trustworthiness to deliver that is taught by his community.<sup>13</sup>

In exploring Israel’s understanding of the divine partner in the relationship, Brueggemann examines God’s ‘sovereign freedom’ and his ‘costly pathos’, or ‘passion’. The first pole, God’s sovereign power, was most often used in favour of Israel; to defeat her enemies and assure her well-being. It was the guarantee of Israel’s safety and position in the world and what generates Israel’s core- and countertestimony: praise, but also lament, because Israel believed that God would (and had the power to) intervene decisively. However this sovereign power could also be turned against Israel: the prophets contain stern warnings of the consequences of Israel’s turn from the ways of God: Israel could not continue to presume upon God’s beneficence when her side of the covenant agreement was being

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<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann refers to it as the ‘polite hermeneutic of the church’ (Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, p. 16).



broken. God will abandon or inflict a dire punishment on Israel and has the power and sovereign freedom to do so. Israel discovered this in the Babylonian Exile.

The opposite pole of Israel's presentation of God is that of costly pathos or passion. This is not simply affective love, but an intense experience of compassion.<sup>14</sup> In 'costly pathos', God is deeply moved by the capacity to suffer with the covenant partner. God's 'radical' relationality is found is founded in a mutuality in which even the lesser partner, Israel, can impinge on God who has opened himself to an intense relationship through questions such as 'how long?' and 'why?'.<sup>15</sup> After the Exile, Israel was indeed restored. In New Testament terms a willingness on God's part to be affected by the lesser partner is demonstrated in the incarnation, and the event of God made flesh in Emmanuel. Such 'un-godlike' behaviour is demonstrated to the disciples in John 13, when Jesus stoops to wash the feet of his disciples. This is the relationship that is formalised in the covenant agreement. God retains 'all the active force and initiative in the transaction',<sup>16</sup> but it is also true that '[t]hese relationships evidence a dimension of mutuality that speaks insistently against any

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<sup>13</sup> Psalm 22.1.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, CD-ROM edn (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 411. Brueggemann draws on Jürgen Moltmann's insight that 'passion' has a double meaning (he references Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 2001 (1974)). Richard Bauckham highlights the multiple senses of 'passion' in his preface to the 2001 edition, p. xii).

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, pp. 319-21.

<sup>16</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 409.

notion that Yahweh is transcendent beyond Israel'.<sup>17</sup> In the complexity of this relationship Israel's life takes the form of a dialogue 'with a powerful, compelling Other who bestows mercy and compels accountability'.<sup>18</sup>

While God shows sovereign freedom and costly pathos in the dialogue with Israel, the way in which humans are seen to relate to God comprise a second pair of terms, namely abandonment (before God) and assertion. The manner of relating to God with which most readers of the Old Testament are familiar is that of doxological abandonment. Worshippers acknowledge that life is dependent on a holy Other, who is to be trusted and is a source of hope.<sup>19</sup> Their speech to and about God is 'confessional, unrestrained, unembarrassed and uttered by the fully committed self'.<sup>20</sup> On the opposite pole, and often less comfortable for Western traditions of Christianity, is assertion toward God. Because God has opened the divine self to Israel, in the text's testimony, Israel is not always the passive partner in relationship with a sovereign God. Israel can move God through texts of lamentation, protest and persuasion. God is 'in the fray', showing

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<sup>17</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 410.

In much of Brueggemann's work he adopts 'Yahweh' for the name of God. Following criticism of his *Theology of the Old Testament* (that despite his injunction that Old Testament theology must be more sensitive towards Jewish scholarship, he still used the potentially offensive term Yahweh) most of his later work revises this to 'YHWH'. Brueggemann explicitly acknowledges this in a footnote in a response to reviews (Walter Brueggemann, 'Response to Joel S. Kaminsky, Margaret S. Odell and Rolf Rendtorff', *Review of Biblical Literature* (1999)).

<sup>18</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1997), p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, pp. 478-85.

<sup>20</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 128.

costly pathos, and so can be engaged by Israel. It must be noted however that for the assertion-abandonment pairing to be an appropriate description of the relationship it is necessary to disregard their potentially negative connotations. Thus assertion is not arrogance, but simply being bold enough to give expression to current experience or opinion. Abandonment is not weak submissiveness, but a confidence to entrust oneself to another.

Thus the divine-human relationship as presented by Brueggemann may be described as a fray: a place of engagement in which both partners are affected by each other.<sup>21</sup> However, relatedness does not only have what might be described as a vertical aspect, between Israel and God. It also has a communal, or horizontal, aspect, concerning Israel's human relationships. This too can be understood as a fray, in contrast to a modern desire for autonomy: in Brueggemann's presentation, engagement with one's neighbour is a covenantal obligation. The biblical text requires humans not only to relate to a sovereign and free God in a full and honest relationship, but also to be brought into community with others. For Brueggemann this includes a commitment to what he calls 'othering' with human neighbours, (that is those who are 'other' to the self) and he identifies this requirement

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<sup>21</sup> For Brueggemann, the phrase 'the fray' is also used to describe both the construction and interpretation of biblical texts, which may be said to be '*in the fray*' of social processes and ideologies (Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme and Text*, ed. by Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 23; Walter Brueggemann, *The Book That Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), p. 169). The phrase is also used by the editors of a volume honouring Brueggemann on his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday: Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, eds., *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

in the decalogue: the first commandments concerning Israel's vertical relationship with God (no other gods, no idols, no misuse of God's name and remembering the Sabbath) and the others being horizontal and concerning the 'revolutionary work' of neighbourliness (honour for parents, no murder, adultery, stealing, false testimony or coveting).<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, solidarity with neighbour is founded on God's own nature; the God who is known as the one who intervenes in the face of oppression.<sup>23</sup>

In considering the contemporary implications of neighbourliness Brueggemann notes the challenge of 'power relations' which can 'deny and preclude serious othering' in communities in which the weaker and the stronger are brought together.<sup>24</sup> In these communities there will always be diversity of opinion and speed of movement towards change.<sup>25</sup> Autonomous liberty must be subordinated to the greater good of community life as directed by pastoral sensitivity towards the neighbour: 'the curb is the well-being of the community, before which the liberated and strong must yield to

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<sup>22</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 41-42. Brueggemann acknowledges that othering with the neighbour can be even more challenging than relationship with God (because 'the neighbor is so near, so visible, and so daily' (Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 8. His specific example is the context of a seminary/academic community, in which this article was first presented). He also, however, asserts that since no neighbour can be as different as God who is other, learning to be 'at risk and in faith with this God' will give 'great resources of grace and courage' for being in relationship with even the most challenging neighbour (Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 9).

<sup>23</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life*, ed. by Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), pp. 55-56.

<sup>24</sup> Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, pp. 16-17.

the membership.<sup>26</sup> In seeking to negotiate the challenge of horizontal relationships, Brueggemann takes example texts from both the Old and New Testaments, noting particularly the emphasis given by the Pauline tradition to horizontal covenanting.<sup>27</sup> For example on the injunction of Philippians 2 to look not to your own interests but to adopt the attitude of Jesus, he writes: ‘The problem of course is that our interests feel so much like the interests of God.’<sup>28</sup> Brueggemann examines in particular Sabbath and Jubilee as exhortations to the ceding of personal power in generous yielding to the ‘indebted, needy, undeserving’, and a willingness to consider one’s moral opponents not to be showing ‘hardheartedness or stupidity or lack of faith’.<sup>29</sup> The key to living in this way is to be found in Paul’s image of the ‘giving, yielding, generous, emptying mind of Christ’.<sup>30</sup> As demanding as this aspect of obedience may be, yet again for Brueggemann, however, it is premised on God’s own relational character:

God wills covenant, insists on the people turning to the Lord, but asks nothing of them that God’s self will not do. God turns to the people. God is

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<sup>26</sup> Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 85. For Brueggemann, this text needs no interpretative gloss: it is so clear in its mandate that the church simply needs to ponder and obey it. Also on Philippians 2 see Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), pp. 108-09.

<sup>29</sup> Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 82.

<sup>30</sup> Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 86. Brueggemann urges a ‘sabbath from loud certitudes’ in favour of an openness to the Spirit which accompanies an attitude of liminality appropriate to the postchristendom. Liminality (the state of being in between the collapse of ‘old configurations of power’ and its new configuration) for Brueggemann is: ‘an occasion of openness when newness may happen, or as we say theologically [...] a situation of immense openness to the newness of the Spirit’ (Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 66).

radically for the people. And it is God's turning that makes their turning possible.<sup>31</sup>

Covenanting (with both God and neighbours) must not therefore be seen simply as joining another club. It is rather 'a sharp reorientation of every loyalty ever claiming us'.<sup>32</sup> Being in relationship with others, divine and human, makes demands of the partners, who are accessible to each other and changed by the interaction.

### **Faith on the way**

In a relationship requiring divine and human openness to others, faith is conceived as a journey as interaction broadens knowledge. For Brueggemann, life in relationship with God is always in progress rather than static; God's people are most often 'on the way', in their experience and understanding of God.<sup>33</sup> Resulting tensions that arise from Israel's presentation of the relationship must not be smoothed out to make interpretative outcomes more palatable, but are a persistent feature of the biblical text which must be maintained in its

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<sup>31</sup> Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*, p. 60.

<sup>32</sup> Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*, p. 76. For Brueggemann, a radical commitment to neighbourliness presents a fundamental challenge to contemporary society and the 'consumer autonomy' which 'invades the life of the church in debilitating ways' (Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 1).

<sup>33</sup> This phrase summarizes Brueggemann's approach to what may also be described as dialectical interpretation, although it is not one of his most frequently used: 'For Israel and for Israel's God, there is no deeper joy, no more serious requirement, no more inescapable burden, than to be reengaged in the process of exchange that never arrives but is always on the way.' (Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 84.) It evokes for him an emphasis on conversation and the inclusion in such a journey of those who are often excluded from interpretative discussion, particularly the poor and marginalised (Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), p. 132).

contemporary presentation. The result is a dynamic approach to biblical interpretation with a constant requirement of ongoing negotiation. He understands this journey as a spiral of experience, or as a series of tensions, rather than a continual linear progress to enlightenment. Brueggemann identifies a cycle (or spiral) through the experiences of Israel with God: orientation is interrupted by periods of disorientation, which is transformed into new orientation, which in time becomes orientation again. The core of the biblical witness is a confidence in the rule of God and his faithfulness to Israel in ‘creation, promise, deliverance, command and nourishment’.<sup>34</sup> This orientated core testimony is the ‘normative substance of Israel’s utterance’; a ‘dominant story line’.<sup>35</sup> However, it is not the only narrative allowed to remain in the biblical text. In opposition to this core testimony is the witness of the protesting and cross-examining ‘countertestimony’ that gives voice to the disorientation felt at God’s absence, instability and occasional hostility.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 211.

<sup>35</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, pp. 126, 206. Brueggemann identifies Israel’s ‘core testimony’ as the belief that God is merciful, gracious, loyal in steadfast love, and faithful or trustworthy. This is reflected in the verbs of ‘originary love’ used of the relationship: having *set his heart* upon them, God has *chosen* Israel, whom he *loves*. See Brueggemann, *Theology*, pp. 217-17, 414-17.

<sup>36</sup> Brueggemann’s *Theology* also includes ‘unsolicited’ and ‘embodied’ testimony. Unsolicited testimony is information offered beyond ‘what has been asked’, and comprises an examination of the partners in relationship with YHWH (namely Israel, the human person, the nations and creation). This testimony informs the account of Brueggemann’s understanding of Israel and God’s relatedness above. Embodied testimony concerns the mediation of God’s power and presence to Israel (focussing on Torah, the King, the prophet, the cult and the sage). See Brueggemann, *Theology*, pp. 407-564, 567-704.

For Brueggemann, the relationship is damaged if this dynamic approach is neglected for the convenience of the powerful. Theologically, core testimony is the expression of praise, and countertestimony the utterance of lament. Yet Brueggemann's dialectical approach also encourages a more suspicious reading which focuses on the social function of the texts and urges caution particularly about resolving the tension in favour of core testimony to the exclusion of countertestimony.<sup>37</sup> Brueggemann outlines this most extensively in his work on the psalms of 'orientation'. Because such texts, as outlined above, express the settled feeling that results from knowing that life is well ordered and understandable because of the reliability of God and God's law, they function to create and maintain a "sacred canopy" under which the community of faith can live out its life with freedom from anxiety'.<sup>38</sup> However this positive intent can be distorted to exert social control: the maintenance of order is most useful to those who are 'economically secure and politically significant'.<sup>39</sup> These texts can be co-opted for what Brueggemann calls 'structure legitimation'. So, for example, texts witnessing to God as

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<sup>37</sup> Methodologically, Brueggemann can be described as a rhetorical and sociological critic. He notes the influence on his work of his doctoral supervisor, James Muilenbug (and particularly his influential SBL Presidential Address 'Form Criticism and Beyond' (Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 55)). Also influential was Norman Gottwald's *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience*, p. ix; Walter Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality: What we do when we read the Bible* (London: SCM, 2009)). For Brueggemann, the two approaches are allied: 'both Muilenburg with rhetoric and Gottwald with sociology insist that Old Testament substance, either historical or theological, cannot be extracted from the text, but must be taken in its full density, in the text where it is situated' (Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 55).

<sup>38</sup> Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, p. 26.



‘judge, king, warrior, father’<sup>40</sup> have on occasion been used to ‘authorize masculine control that has often been heavy-handed, exploitative, and brutalizing’.<sup>41</sup> In this way, a (human) power structure is apparently given legitimation by divine sanction and those who hold power co-opt an image of God for their own ends. For example, texts of praise can be used coercively when the reason for uttering praise is removed; when orientation is imposed rather than new orientation being allowed to break out spontaneously. A summons to praise becomes an imperative: namely ‘you will be happy with your lot, and thank God for it’.<sup>42</sup> For Brueggemann, those legitimating structures at the expense of the embrace of pain to which the text witnesses not only create a profound disjunction between life experience and expectation of Israel, but even make God an idol, mute without transformative power, and in turn make a people who lose the capacity ‘to judge, discern, critique, or risk.’<sup>43</sup> Orientation that excludes disorientation leads to inauthentic faith that is far from persuasive.

Rather than excluding one or other set of testimony regarding the relationship, Brueggemann’s approach requires the maintenance of tension in order to ensure a full and honest picture remains. Thus: core *and* countertestimony; orientation *and* disorientation; assertion *and* abandonment; sovereign freedom *and* costly pathos. This is an

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<sup>39</sup> Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>40</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 272.

<sup>41</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 234.

<sup>42</sup> Brueggemann also explores this in terms of summons and reason: when the reason for praise is excised, the subversive power of praise is diminished, because the people forget the way in which God is able to transform their circumstances. On the subversive potential of praise see Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise*.

authentic account of faith as the canon of scripture has preserved it. Even the covenant relationship itself can be seen to have aspects of tension. In this depth of the relationship between God and Israel, it cannot be denied that Israel is expected to meet certain covenantal obligations, most notably fidelity to God.<sup>44</sup> Brueggemann observes one stream making ‘stringent requirement’ of Israel and the other promising ‘abiding abundance’.<sup>45</sup> The covenant is ‘unilateral in generosity’ and ‘bilateral in requirement’.<sup>46</sup> Setting a conditional covenant *against* an unconditional one has been distracting in Brueggemann’s opinion, being not based on the presentation of the text, but on a futile and misleading Christian ‘preoccupation’ with the distinction between law and grace.<sup>47</sup> This destroys the inscrutability of deep relationships: such distinctions would not, for example, be applied to human relationships such as that between parent and child or husband and wife. Such relationships are intimate and intense in a way that refuses such simple division: there will be aspects of mutuality and others of incommensurability. It is this richness that means that ‘the relationship is endlessly open, alive, giving and

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<sup>43</sup> Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise*, p. 113.

<sup>44</sup> Brueggemann summarizes them according to the interests of the Deuteronomist and the Priestly tradition: doing justice and being holy in the presence of God (Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 198).

<sup>45</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture, and the Church*, ed. by Carolyn J. Sharp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), p. 37.

<sup>46</sup> Brueggemann, *Disruptive Grace*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>47</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, pp. 198, 419. Elsewhere he contrasts the way in which ‘Western Christianity has long practiced a flight to the transcendent’ with a Jewishness which is ‘characterized by dialogical-dialectical modes of discourse’ (Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 83).

demanding, and at risk’.<sup>48</sup> For Brueggemann: ‘It is our desperate effort to reduce or “solve” the wonder of “the Holy One in our midst” that leads to such distortions as law and grace, freedom and servitude, unconditional and conditional’.<sup>49</sup> The tension is held together by relationship. It is a responsibility and a privilege.

In this relationship, God relates with both sovereign freedom *and* costly pathos and Israel responds with both assertion *and* abandonment. If, for example, God only acts in sovereign freedom and is not affected by the relationship, then the weaker partner Israel ‘would long ago have been disposed of’<sup>50</sup> and God would have become the unmoved mover of classical theism.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, if Israel only receives passionate treatment from God, then freedom is ceded to the weaker partner, who enjoys complete security.<sup>52</sup> Neither of these options suggests a healthy relationship, in which there is genuine mutuality: they yield instead an image that does no service to the dense portrayal given by the text.<sup>53</sup> As with God’s freedom and

<sup>48</sup> Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 38. Paul Fiddes concludes that there is a real difference in the understandings of covenant, but that it concerns emphasis: ‘It is as if God knows that people need *sometimes* to hear the word of *promise* more loudly, while at another time it is the word of *obligation* and responsibility that needs to be stressed.’ (Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), p. 76.)

<sup>50</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 411.

<sup>51</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 411.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 74, on the interplay of a dense text, a dense God, and dense people. On the intensity of the engagement, Brueggemann comments: ‘Israel’s best doxology is not self-congratulation nor is it resignation. It is hope kept sharp by pain still present. It is praise kept honest by

passion, in relation to abandonment and assertion, Brueggemann believes that the church should resist moving to one pole or the other. If there is an overdose of abandonment, this becomes ‘coercive conformity’ (or ‘graceless obedience’), such as when Job’s friends refuse to question God. If the prevalent stance is assertion, this becomes ‘detached’ or ‘praiseless autonomy’, as exercised by Psalm 10’s ‘fool’, who will not acknowledge or praise God. Both of these practices ‘miss the wonder, mystery, and miracle that belong to a life of genuine covenantal interaction’.<sup>54</sup>

However, the textual plurality and apparent incohesion of statements of orientated core testimony and disorientated countertestimony presents a problem for the interpreter: namely the manner of their resolution to coherent interpretative statements: what does the Bible actually say to us today? We will return to this question in relation to Baptist interpretative communities below, but Brueggemann resists the necessity of this resolution, preferring the tension and placing it at the heart of his approach. Harmonizing the two tendencies, most often through disregarding the voice of

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candid abrasiveness. It is celebration kept open for subversiveness. It is not self-satisfied endorsement of what is, but the insistence that God and the empire must be open, and must pay attention to what will be given out beyond pain into joy.’ (Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise*, p. 153.)

<sup>54</sup> Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 21. This tension between abandonment and assertion is explored by Brueggemann in his work on the Psalms, in the movement from orientation to disorientation to new orientation. Thus for Brueggemann, Abraham can be radically obedient in taking Isaac to be sacrificed in Genesis 22 because he has previously stood and protested to God in Genesis 18. Similarly, Jeremiah is most insistent on the importance of obedience, but is also ‘the voice of the most shrill complaint and lamentation of any of the prophets’ (Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, p. 29).

countertestimony, not only requires a ‘mumbling though many aspects of lived experience’ but is contrary to the evidence of Israel’s faith as displayed in the text of the Old Testament.<sup>55</sup> For Brueggemann, although Christians have often been wary of it, maintaining a dialectical tension is not an exclusively Jewish practice; the same dialectic is to be found at the heart of the Christian story in the events of Good Friday to Easter Day. In this narrative, Brueggemann identifies the pain and protest of countertestimony in the day of crucifixion held together with the joy and thanksgiving of core testimony in the resurrection. Eschatologically, Christians linger between the two, knowing both the pain of Friday and the joy of Sunday as they wait for the final coming of Christ.<sup>56</sup> For Brueggemann, full and deep relationships must allow change, variety and the cycle of experience. This is faith that it is on the way, because it is in the fray.

### ***Baptists in the fray and on the way***

It may appear that we have travelled far from our introductory material about interpretative diversity in a Baptist context. We have seen however that diversity is not an inconvenience, or simply an inevitability – rather, if we learn to negotiate it, we could celebrate it as deep and full relatedness. In reality, Baptists may not find this move as difficult as may be anticipated, since I believe we have a

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<sup>55</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 'Old Testament Theology as a Particular Conversation: Adjudication of Israel's Sociotheological Alternatives', in *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 118-49 (p. 140); Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 400.

hermeneutical context that lends itself to engaging with Brueggemann's observations.

As the foundation of their congregational life, many seventeenth and eighteenth century Baptists made local church covenants patterned after the two dimensions of the English Separatist tradition: covenants made vertically with God and horizontally with each other.<sup>57</sup> The early Baptist confessions demonstrate the way in which they believed that the church to which they belonged, and in which context scripture was to be read, was not merely a human institution. On the contrary, they had been called by God to join the church universal, manifest in local churches.<sup>58</sup> As a result of the connection between membership of a local church and the vertical aspect of covenanting, the local church covenants made by Baptists expressed their commitment to 'walk together' with God in obedience to his commands as found in scripture. Notwithstanding the absence of explicit reference to local church covenants, the confessions also include implicit covenantal language of mutuality, gathering and on-going commitment to discipleship. Thus, for example, the Second London Confession of 1689 contains a description of the obedience of the saints who 'do willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ, giving up themselves, to the Lord and one to another by the

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<sup>56</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 401.

<sup>57</sup> The practice was widespread, although not universal and the precise status of the covenant varied between congregations. See Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990).

<sup>58</sup> The church was constituted by God's covenant of grace made with humans. Paul Fiddes outlines the different ways in which this phrase, and that of 'covenant' itself was understood by Puritans and Separatists (Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, pp. 24-31).

will of God'.<sup>59</sup> The practicalities of this discipleship were worked out by 'seeking the mind of Christ', to whom they had ceded authority by confessing that 'Jesus is Lord'. Being united with Christ through baptism joined individuals to his body, the church.<sup>60</sup> The early Baptists shared the Protestant Reformers' belief in the 'priesthood of all believers' and held that it was Christ's presence in the midst of the covenant community, rather than creeds or an episcopacy, that was the locus of authority. Indeed, as Paul Fiddes observes, covenant, which is founded on relationship and trust, does not lend itself easily to codifying documents since 'walking together' is an open ended invitation to a journey.<sup>61</sup>

The vertical and horizontal aspects of the covenant relationship have been united for Baptists in their hermeneutical process in which, while there has been nothing to stop individuals reading and interpreting it, the implications of the Bible's meaning have traditionally been discerned communally. A covenantal context, premised on deep and committed divine and human relationships, provides a potentially creative context for Baptist hermeneutics in which communities might walk together in an open ended and exciting journey of interpreting scripture together for their own time

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<sup>59</sup> Second London Confession XXVI.6, in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith: An Interpretation of Every Significant Baptist Confession from the Earliest Anabaptist Times to the Present Day* (Chicago: Judson Press, 1969), p. 285.

<sup>60</sup> The initiative in this is God's, who offers salvation (cf. Paul S. Fiddes, 'Church and Sect: Cross-Currents in Early Baptist Life', in *Exploring Baptist Origins*, ed. by Anthony R. Cross and Nicholas J. Wood (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2010), pp. 33-57 (p. 48)).

<sup>61</sup> Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 9.

and context. As Baptists listen together to discern the mind of Christ, hearing brothers and sisters share their differing opinions and understandings, even looking beyond the community for new voices to inform interpretation, the resulting process has the potential to be exhilarating. Yet if a community fears diversity rather than embraces it constructively, the communal interpretative process is more likely to be experienced as disorientating and divisive.

Therefore, the question to pose in terms of interpretation is whether as Baptists we have paid lip service to a covenantal ecclesiology without realising it is a responsibility as well as a privilege. I propose that the key to engaging diversity constructively within the covenantal hermeneutical context is learning to read the Bible together on the way and in the fray. Part of the responsibility for this lies with church leaders, who need to help congregations create safe covenantal hermeneutical spaces by modelling an alternative to the top down approach to dealing with interpretative diversity outlined in the introduction. In the second part of this lecture, I will offer some suggestions for the way in which we might approach this task.

### **Interpreting the Bible *in the fray***

Giving attention to the processes involved in communal interpretation is not a major priority for many churches, or even ministers training in colleges. The tendency is to focus on personal spirituality (which can be reduced to me and my Bible in my quiet time) or on the act of preaching (which can be reduced to effective communication on the part of the preacher, followed by applying what the preacher says for



the listener). Drawing on Brueggemann, therefore, I suggest that Baptists should be more intentional in creating a hospitable hermeneutical space which takes seriously the depth of our relationships with God and each other. A starting point is a repositioning of interpreters in relation to the text and community: the Bible is not there to be conquered or mastered, and nor for that matter are other interpreters.

Covenantal hermeneutics in the Baptist tradition should be deeply committed to a relationship with the ‘other’, whether divine or human. In this, Baptists have the potential to guard against an inward looking individualistic interpretation of the biblical material. As the biblical studies academy has demonstrated through the impact of liberation interpretation, many of these voices who might be regarded as ‘other’ now offer disorientating readings of scripture to those who have previously controlled interpretation. More ‘centrist’ interpreters are now challenged to take account of the concerns of feminist, post-colonial, queer, and other readings which have until recent years been almost entirely excluded from interpretative discussion.<sup>62</sup> Baptist hermeneutics in local covenanting communities also needs to undergo a process of self-reflection in identifying the weak voices of the ‘other’ that have hitherto been silenced or marginalised by those who lead or are strong voices in Baptist interpretation. These ‘other’ voices

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<sup>62</sup> ‘Centrist’ is the word used by Brueggemann to describe the influential ‘establishment’ of biblical scholars whose work is ‘in continuity’ with what has gone before (Brueggemann, *Theology*, p. 89).

need then to be drawn into interpretative communities that might not always have been marked by their diversity.<sup>63</sup>

Firstly, interpretation must involve the divine Other, God. The earliest Baptists were clear that God was active in their midst as they read scripture together to the extent that having listened to scripture, they were willing to ‘put aside’ the biblical and other texts while it was expounded during what they called ‘spiritual worship’.<sup>64</sup> Today’s Baptists however can amass around them endless tools and aids as they read scripture. These range from the popular evangelical daily ‘quiet time’ notes, which divide the text into manageable portions, often accompanied by separate explanatory and applicatory sections, to an ever expanding range of ‘Study’ and ‘Life Application’ Bibles replete with extended explanatory footnotes and inserts. There is much amongst all this that is commendable: Bible reading aids do much to enable those without theological training to negotiate an ancient text composed in a context far removed from their own. However an over-reliance on these resources can foster a degree of laziness amongst those who would *consume* scripture and assimilate the information

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<sup>63</sup> The interpretative partners envisaged here are those who explicitly covenant together, which assumes that churches will already have done the complex work of how some of these voices may have been brought into membership already.

<sup>64</sup> Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM, 2004), pp. 127-8. Ellis comments elsewhere: ‘In Amsterdam, reading, translation, and study happened in preparation for worship, but the worship itself was perceived to be an event in which the worshippers were open to the moving of the Holy Spirit as they reflected on their recollections of what they had heard or read previously. Such an approach might encourage an approach to hearing scripture that is more creative or imaginative than is likely from the close scrutiny of a written text.’ (Christopher J. Ellis, ‘Gathering Around the Word: Baptists, Scripture, and Worship’, in *The ‘Plainly Revealed’ Word of God? Baptist*

contained therein.<sup>65</sup> In the extreme, the only transaction that takes place is between an individual and a mediation or predetermined interpretation of scripture in which its meaning has already been fixed, rather than an encounter with God through the biblical text (and others in community). The goal becomes simply the rational understanding of a text, so it may be applied with efficiency and effectiveness. The Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain contains an implicit reminder that Christ is the authoritative Word of God, as revealed in, or perhaps better, mediated through the biblical text.<sup>66</sup> It is this divine Word with whom relationship is to be sought when scripture is interpreted, rather than mining a text for answers or winning an interpretative debate.

Secondly, interpretation must include human others. In this, space must be made for both weak and strong voices, in which process interpreters become willing to be open to others impinging on them and the interpretative decisions of the community. In Brueggemann's language, this may be described as learning to embrace the pain of others. Briefly, I suggest three ways in which space may be made for

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*Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice*, ed. by Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011), pp. 101-21 (p. 109).)

<sup>65</sup> That in 1845 William Brock issued the exhortation quoted by Chris Ellis suggests that this is not an entirely new phenomenon: 'You are to take heed *how* you hear; not thoughtlessly, not indolently, not superstitiously receiving whatever may be advanced, but receiving it with observation and care.' (Ellis, *Gathering*, p. 130.)

<sup>66</sup> The first clause of the Declaration, which is the Basis of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, states: 'That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.' (Richard Kidd, ed., *Something to Declare: a Study of the Declaration of Principle* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1996), p. 10.)

weak voices. Firstly, those conventionally considered ‘strong’ are required to acknowledge their own weakness. Hearing the preacher say ‘I struggle with this text’ or ‘the implications of this text are hard for me to accept’ can give other community members the permission to express their own confusion or disorientation when reading scripture. Secondly, Baptist communities could be more intentional about reflecting *communally* on the transformation that is expected through reading scripture. Often, this ‘application’ of scripture is present, but only as the closing points of a monological sermon to be inwardly reflected upon after the close of the service of worship. Thirdly, more intentionally associating the interpretation of scripture with the communion table may encourage an attitude of hospitality in interpretation. The communion table is the visible reminder of God’s pathos, the place at which congregational members are to reconcile with each other and to which those who are in some way ‘other’ are invited. Although the communion table has not always been seen as a place of welcome to all members of the community, reading the word together *around* the table in covenantal dialogue may be fruitful for the hermeneutical process involved in seeking the mind of Christ as each community member’s interpretative voice is welcomed and valued.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> There have often been exclusions from communion, in practices such as ‘fencing the table’ (in which a warning is given by the president to those who may be unworthy to receive communion) and closed communion (in which only members of the particular local church may partake). In many churches, children (of church members, but who have not been baptised as believers themselves) are also excluded to varying degrees, although studies proposing that a more robust theological understanding of children and their place in Baptist churches encourages churches to consider imaginative ways in which this may be redressed. In 2010 the Baptist Union

But what about also making space for voices that are strong because of their expertise? In a covenantal community, the contribution of an expert, whether a minister, academic or long standing and well respected member of the church, should not be given pre-eminence simply because of that person's position or status, but may be given extra attention as a voice amongst others of the covenant community by virtue of their recognised wisdom and history within that particular community. In this way voices that may be strong because of their expertise take their place in congregational community rather than making pronouncements from on high. No member of the covenanting community, whether pastor or people, ought to use the biblical text to justify their predetermined preferred way of life or approach to interpretation, but may instead read the text against themselves, allowing the divine voice to challenge and question their previous interpretation and praxis.<sup>68</sup> That is to say that both pastor and text are put back into the relational fray with the result that community members have to do more of the hard work of struggling with covenantal interpretation since 'what the text (or God) says' is not necessarily the same as 'what the pastor says'.<sup>69</sup>

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released a resource for churches on this subject: *Gathering Around the Table: Children and Communion* (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2010). For a more sustained theological reflection see Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State: the Positive Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 138-52.

<sup>68</sup> Fowl, S. E. and Jones, L. G., *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991), p. 43.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Sean Winter, *More Light and Truth? Biblical Interpretation in Covenantal Perspective* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2007), p. 36: 'Christian history is littered with examples of Christian leaders who, claiming to know the secret meaning of the text, left no space for disagreement and thereby abused their power. Baptists in

The presence of both strong and weak voices within a community should not automatically pose a problem for communal interpretation. Rather, listening to the voice of the 'other' introduces fresh perspectives (according to gender, racial background, social class, sexuality etc.) to stimulate reflection. This potential extends to the inclusion of voices that may choose not to be part of Baptist communities, sometimes because of their negative perception or experience of the treatment that they will receive. Baptists have often proclaimed the perspicuity of scripture and the freedom of access to all its riches, but must also accept that interpretation in covenantal community may not always be smooth, if all voices are to be heard and measured. Some voices in communities will always be stronger than others, whether through training and experience or through social processes, but communities must engage this potential fray, if the relationships are to grow rather than fracture as the Bible is read. Communal interpretation is not a battle, but it does require attention to be paid to relationships and attitudes towards each other when conflicting opinions surface. Relatedness can be seen as the source of disorientation, but may also be the appropriate response to it: disorientation caused by an- o/Other requires not a withdrawal from community, but an intensification of the covenant relationship.

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particular will want to find ways of hearing the voices and interpretation of those who lack status, power and institutional authority.'

### **Interpreting the Bible *on the way***

Interpreters may negotiate diversity in a covenantal context by embracing the pain of others, and in so doing, creating hospitable space for strong and weak voices. Because in this process, interpreters open themselves to relationship with God and with each other, what may be right one day will be inappropriate on another. What may be fitting in one context will be unacceptable in another. The interpretative journey may be long and disorientating. It may slow down the plans church leaders have made for the next six months or longer. So would it not be easier if we simply settled for uniformity? Why do churches and Unions not adopt some guidelines or statements of acceptable interpretations so that we all know where we stand? Then we could tell who is in and who is out; who is right and who is wrong.

I propose that interpreting the Bible ‘on the way’ requires a turning away from the contemporary tendency to pragmatism, or activism, at the expense of everything else. This attitude can repress discussion and searching questions because they are a (potentially disorientating) distraction. Ruth Gouldbourne noted this in her Beasley- Murray lecture:

we live in a social and professional context which is deeply functional and pragmatic, and which is shaped by patterns of measurement, meeting targets, and being efficient. And it has to be said that arguing, slowly, carefully, with respect and with enough time and hope of finding a way forward together is not culturally the norm, nor is it efficient. Nor does it give quick results.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ruth M. B. Gouldbourne, ‘In Praise of Incompetence’, *Baptist Quarterly*, 44.2 (2011), 68-85 (p. 70).

Using Brueggemann's language we can identify in this a preference for the efficiency of orientation, particularly for those who have an interest in maintaining the stability of a congregation: it is here that the temptation to structure legitimation is great. The risk of entering a period of disorientation is diminished by discouraging the voicing of counter-testimony in the form of new interpretations. This is not new.

In 1986, Brian Haymes lamented:

[W]hy cannot we have that serious open discussion about the faith such as went on among earlier Baptists when they produced their confessions? [...] I wish we could take the task, the practice of theology, more seriously amongst us. I suggest that one reason why it does not happen is fear, fear of division and factions; fear too, perhaps, in the minds of some that they have inward doubts anyway about their theological formulations but they cannot confess them.<sup>71</sup>

The witness of the biblical text and two millennia of church history is not that God's people will always have an easy ride. Nor is it that God's people are the ones in control. They have access to the one who is; indeed, they are in a very special relationship with him, but they themselves are not able to fix every circumstance. That is the lesson of disorientation. Maintaining a pragmatic agenda at the expense of relationships dispossesses community members of their interpretative contribution and may do personal damage by forcing the suppression of questions.

Interpretation that is 'on the way' requires a willingness to embark upon a risky journey within the community that will necessitate a degree of struggle, whilst knowing that this has always been the way for God's people. When, for Baptists, 'final authority'



rests with Jesus as revealed through the text of scripture and interpreted by the church, there must therefore be a process for deciding what God is saying to that particular community or which version of the text's sense or meaning is to become normative. Baptist hermeneutics must therefore consider the way in which interpretation may be experienced as a genuinely communal search for the voice of God rather than the submission of the many to the interpretations of the powerful few. It is in negotiating this difficulty that covenantal Baptist hermeneutics faces its greatest practical challenge and perhaps in this area that critical reflection has been most neglected.

Of course, in order for communities to function, it is necessary for different opinions to be engaged and decisions made regarding them, particularly in relation to the ethical conduct of the community and to enable conversation with those from other traditions.<sup>72</sup> Historically, Baptists have resisted the making of creedal statements, and the expectation of 'further light and truth' has supported the covenantal commitment to walking together in ways 'known or to be made known' in equipping Baptists to live with the tension of provisionality that creedal statements tend to resist.<sup>73</sup> However a brief

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<sup>71</sup> Brian Haymes, *A Question of Identity: Reflections on Baptist Principles and Practice* (Leeds: Yorkshire Baptist Association, 1986), p. 29.

<sup>72</sup> The need to explain belief and practice generated the early confessions, which today provide a valuable insight into the way in which Baptists have understood their practice. See Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions* for examples.

<sup>73</sup> On the 'further light clause' see Anthony R. Cross, "Through a glass darkly': The Further Light Clause in Baptist Thought", in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haymes*, ed. by Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2011), pp. 92-118. In relation to Baptist hermeneutics, see Winter, *More Light and Truth*.

comment on the further light clause is required, with relation to the communal context under consideration in this lecture. Firstly, Baptist communities do not discern further light from God by simply agreeing with those who shout loudest. Secondly, a search for further light does not have an inevitable liberalising or conservatizing direction depending on the inclinations and lenses of the interpreters: the voice of the divine Other cannot be equated with our human preferences. Thirdly, the decision that further light has been discerned on a particular matter is not to be made by simple majority: there is always the possibility that the dissenting minority voice may be prophetic.

When decisions are made, they should be made by the community as a whole, are to be seen as penultimate or proximate, and must never fail to underestimate the cost that each of these decisions might have for community members, who may dissent from it, but in covenantal commitment choose to submit to one another.<sup>74</sup> In the light of this, if Baptist interpretative communities are to avoid structure legitimation, I propose that freeing communities from the expectation

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Ways 'known or to be made known' is taken from William Bradford's account of the covenant made by the Separatist congregation in Gainsborough in 1606: '[...] as ye Lords free people, [they] joined them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in ye fellowship of ye gospell to walk in all his wayes, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.' (William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1856), p. 8.)

<sup>74</sup> 'Proximate' is the term used by James McClendon. In concluding his account of the interconnected authorities that are ultimately proximate to the authority of God, he comments 'to recognize their proximate character is a defeat only for those who despise Paul's apostolic patience. For the rest, it is a great gain. To be proximate is to be "next to" [...] The proximate adjoins the absolute; that is its wonder, its mission, its end'. (James Wm. McClendon Jr, *Systematic Theology II: Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 488).

of perpetual orientation will give permission for individuals to negotiate the disorientation of interpretative diversity together. In addressing this, Brueggemann's pairings of freedom and pathos and asserting and abandoning used in relation to the vertical relationship can be applied to the horizontal aspect of covenanting in Baptist interpretative communities.

In practice, although bound in covenantal relationship to God and others, the individual in a Baptist congregation is still 'free' to act as she or he pleases, ending his or her commitment to the covenantal relationship if other partners fail to meet expectations.<sup>75</sup> Equally, an individual has the power to attempt to impose their interpretation on others, choosing to ignore or suppress the diversity of opinion that may be represented. However, in reflecting the image of God suggested by Brueggemann, he or she may not only act in freedom, but may also choose to submit to the bonds of covenant love in 'passion', being moved by deep relationships with others to the extent that personal desires and interpretations may be affected through interaction with the community. Of particular interest is what happens when there is an excess of individual 'freedom' at the expense of the practice of 'costly pathos' within the community.<sup>76</sup> When this happens,

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<sup>75</sup> This is similar to the way in which God in Brueggemann's description could in sovereign freedom choose to terminate the covenant agreement with Israel. In the specific case of hermeneutics, individuals may choose to leave the community if their favoured interpretation of a particular passage is not shared by the rest of the group.

<sup>76</sup> This of course assumes that individual freedom to leave the covenant community has not been exercised. An over emphasis on the opposite pole, 'costly pathos' can lead to interpretative plurality in which no decisions are ever made and questions of 'truth' are neglected or even feared.

the exercise of 'freedom' to interpret scripture has the potential to create misunderstanding when individuals become entrenched in their own position to the extent that they refuse to hear the insights of another approach and fear any movement from one position to another. Influential members of the community may propose that their interpretation or approach is 'correct' or 'sound' and at times exercise their 'freedom' in a domineering manner, quite unlike that displayed by God, the stronger partner in the vertical covenantal relationship. To use another of Brueggemann's metaphors, they turn their position into the community's 'core testimony' and do not allow the utterance of 'countertestimony' that asserts a different view of the status quo. Fear is a natural response to dissent when certain individuals have a vested interest in maintaining control of a community.

At various times, interpreters in covenanting communities will need either to 'assert' or to 'abandon' their interpretations and opinions in a never ending journey of negotiating interpretative plurality. Whether in regard to the relationship with God, or with others, exclusively asserting selves will transform a covenantal community into one based on contractual obligation, in which each party bargains and seeks to put the other in their debt. A community in which members only 'abandon' themselves to others, however, may not only fail to make any decisions, but may also create a context in which interpreters cannot voice the fullness of their experience: struggle gives way to submission and engagement to passivity. When the two are combined, however, a member may on occasion abandon themselves to others in the covenantal community by freely submitting

themselves to the interpretation agreed by the community. At other times they may also initiate the assertion of a new or contrary interpretation which they believe needs to be addressed by the community.

Holding together assertion and abandonment (and freedom and passion) in this way presents a challenge to those accustomed to a settled experience of faith in which the relationship between the individual and the divine (while omitting the relationship with the community) may be controlled in order to make the demands of faith manageable. There will be occasions when the pain of others challenges previously comfortable living. Conversely there will be times when the joy of others brings pain through the realisation of unfulfilled hopes. There may be instances when the process of interpretation leads other community members into new understandings of which some are unsure. Interpreting the Bible on the way introduces a practice of interpretation which refuses to do violence to individuals and communities by steam rolling them into an 'acceptable' interpretation.

## **Conclusion**

This lecture does not solve our interpretative debates. It does not offer a quick fix for churches facing a period of disorientation precipitated by the surfacing of interpretative diversity. It does not offer a strategy by which the hard work of communal biblical interpretation can be avoided. It does however suggest that Baptists may be helped in the contemporary context by paying closer attention to their vertical and

horizontal covenantal relationships. It proposes that Baptist biblical interpretation ought to be thoroughly communal and participatory as church members walk and read the Bible together with each other and with God. The top down response to diversity outlined in the introduction may be avoided if communities are freed of the expectation of perpetual orientation, and if they have a better understanding of the processes at work when individuals come together in the presence of God to interpret scripture. As we continue *on the way* of our interpretative journey together, this lecture offers an invitation to do so *in the fray* of open and honest relationships, and to do so more intentionally.

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# Always on the way and in the fray:

## Reading the Bible as Baptists

This lecture explores contemporary British Baptist biblical interpretation, using Walter Brueggemann as a dialogue partner. The divine-human relationship as presented by Brueggemann is described as a 'fray': a place of engagement in which the partners are affected by each other. In the biblical account, this relationship also has a communal aspect in which humans are brought into relationship with others. In this relatedness, faith is conceived as a journey in which interaction broadens knowledge: it is 'on the way'. The lecture uses Brueggemann to provide an analytic vocabulary with which to examine the processes, negotiations and pressures that require engagement when the Bible is read communally. It argues that division is not an inevitable consequence of interpretative diversity in Baptist communities. Rather, their particular hermeneutical context, in which interpreters understand themselves as being 'on the way and in the fray', is creative for communal biblical interpretation. The lecture appeals for the intentional creation of a hospitable hermeneutical space which resists both a solely individualistic approach to interpretation and the imposition of uniformity.



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