

THE WHITLEY LECTURE
2007

More Light and Truth?
Biblical Interpretation
in Covenantal Perspective

Sean Winter

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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 historian. Whitley was a notable scholar and pastor in both England and Australia. Following a pastorate in Bridlington, during which he also taught at Rawdon College in Yorkshire, he became the first Principal of the Baptist College of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia, in 1891. This institution was subsequently renamed Whitley College in his honour. Returning to England after eleven years in Australia, he was a leading and influential figure in the denomination during the early part of the twentieth century. His *History of British Baptists* (1923) is still an important source of information and comment for contemporary historians.

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*. Altogether he made an important contribution to Baptist life and self-understanding, providing a model of how a pastor-scholar might enrich the life and faith of others.

The Lectureship established in his name is intended to be an encouragement to research and writing by Baptist scholars, and to enable the results of their work to be published. 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. It is always keen to hear about work being done by Baptist scholars, and is prepared to consider making grants, as well as offering advice and support.

Each year from 1996, a leading Baptist scholar has been appointed the Whitley Lecturer. The lecturer is invited to write and deliver a lecture as a significant contribution to Baptist thought. It is given at different locations during the course of the year, and published by the committee.

This year the committee is delighted that Revd Dr Sean Winter, tutor at Northern Baptist College in Manchester, has agreed to be the tenth Whitley Lecturer in this series. Sean prepared for Baptist ministry at Bristol Baptist College (1986-1990), where he studied at the University of Bristol, and then went on to Regent's Park College (1990-1993) to study for a DPhil. He worked with the present Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright, completing a thesis exploring Paul's rhetorical strategy in his letter to the Philippians in 1997. In 1994 he was called to be minister at Abbey Baptist Church in Reading, a historic town-centre church. The call

back into college life came in 2000 with a move to Northern Baptist College in Manchester, where he is the Tutor in New Testament. He has served the Baptist Union of Great Britain in numerous roles, and currently serves as the Moderator of the Baptist Union Council.

In his Whitley Lecture Sean pursues one of his research interests in the area of theological hermeneutics and explores the distinctive contribution of Baptist Christians to the task of interpreting the Bible today. This theme is of interest to all those who believe in the continuing relevance of the message of the Bible, and in particular to all those of a Baptist persuasion who want to think seriously about their faith.

The printed lecture is available from the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

Peter Shepherd
(Secretary, Whitley Lectureship Management Committee)

WHITLEY LECTURE 2007

More Light and Truth? Biblical Interpretation in Covenantal Perspective

INTRODUCTION

On the 21st July 1620 the exiled English Separatist congregation in Leiden in the Netherlands met for prayer, in anticipation of their impending trip to the port of Southampton. There they intended to board a ship called the *Mayflower*, set for the Americas. They prayed, and their pastor, John Robinson, preached. One of those who heard that sermon recalled its content and perhaps the more memorable phrases. Robinson, who would not be travelling with them, exhorted his flock to hear God speaking through the ministry of other shepherds, for:

he was very confident the Lord had more light and truth yet to break forth out of his Holy Word. ... For though they [the Calvinists] were precious lights shining in their Times, yet God had not yet revealed his whole will to them; 'and were they now living', saith he, 'they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received.'¹

1 Walter H. Burgess, *John Robinson, Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers: A Study of His Life and Times* (London / New York: Williams and Norgate / Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920), 239-40. See also Robert Ashton, *The Works of John Robinson: Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers*, ed. Robert Ashton, 3 vols. (London: John Snow, 1851), xliv-xlv. The two primary sources for the events of that period are Alexander Young, *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers of the Colony of Plymouth: From 1602-1625* (Boston: C.C. Little and J. Brown, 1841), 396, which contains Edward Winslow's memoir of the sermon, and William Bradford, *Bradford's History 'Of Plimouth Plantation' from the Original Manuscript with a Report of the Proceedings Incident to the Return of the Manuscript to Massachusetts* (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1899), 71-83. On the interpretative commitments of New England Puritans see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill / London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), Lisa M. Gordis, *Opening Scripture: Bible Reading and Interpretive Authority in Puritan New England* (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

‘The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word’. Some of those reading or listening to this lecture may have heard that phrase, even sung it. In what follows, however, I want to unpack it, explore it, and relate it to the ongoing and pressing debates about the ways in which we understand and interpret the Bible today. In the title of the lecture, the phrase ends with a question mark. My hope is that by the time we have finished thinking about these things together we can remove the question mark, understand why it is all right to remove it, and explore together the consequences of its removal.

John Robinson, let it be said, was not a Baptist and his congregation not a Baptist congregation. So why adopt his phrase as the title for a lecture that will largely be read and heard by Baptists? Of course a lecture given under the name of W.T. Whitley finds an appropriate starting point in historical reminiscence. However, a further answer comes when we continue to read Edward Winslow’s account of that July day. Winslow tells us that, having spoken of the potential for Scripture to cast ‘further light’, Robinson:

put us in mind of our Church Covenant; at least that part of it whereby ‘we promise and covenant with God and with one another to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known to us from his written Word’; but withal exhorted us to take heed what we received and weigh it with other Scriptures of truth before we received it. ‘For’, saith he, ‘it is not possible the Christian World should come so lately out of such thick antichristian darkness; and that full perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.’²

The reference to ‘our Church Covenant’ takes us back to the Separatist congregation(s) of Gainsborough-Scrooby, who, in 1606,

as the Lord’s free people, joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all his ways, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.³

2 Burgess, *John Robinson*, 240.

3 Bradford, ‘*Of Plimouth Plantation*’, 14. See the account in B.R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 122-123. On p.1 White notes that William Bradford was present at the 1606 covenant making.

The congregation was very soon to be pastored by John Smyth who, together with Thomas Helwys and other members of the Gainsborough congregation, formed the first General Baptist congregation, albeit on Dutch soil, following their exile in 1608.⁴

‘More light and truth’ ... ‘ways known and to be made known’. Both phrases speak of a basic conviction held by these spiritual and historical forebears: a conviction that legitimated their separation from the established church and ultimately from one another. Both phrases speak of the Bible’s capacity to speak in new ways: ways not previously heard, seen or understood. Or, to put it more directly, they suggest the possibility of diversity, development and disagreement in biblical interpretation. The Bible, for these believers, always contained the potential to mean something other than had previously been known or understood.⁵

In the pages that follow I seek to explore this ancient idea in the light of contemporary understandings of the nature of interpretation. I offer a description of the task of biblical interpretation that allows significant space for Scripture to speak in new ways and to lead the church of Jesus Christ into ways as yet unknown. Yet, given the reality of our lives as readers, interpreters, disciples, churches, denominations, I believe that this cannot be done without also attending to the fact of interpretive *diversity*. Let me be clear at the outset: the conviction that Scripture can speak in new ways is intimately connected with the fact that we *interpret*

- 4 The 1606 congregation soon split into the Gainsborough and Scrooby fellowships, the former led by Smyth, the latter in time by Robinson. William Bradford dismisses the Smyth and Helwys congregation with the following summary: ‘after falling into some errors in the Low Countries there (for the most part) buried themselves, and their names’ (Bradford, *Of Plimouth Plantation*, 14). On Smyth’s indebtedness to the earlier English Separatists see White, *English Separatist Tradition* 122-125. On the theological differences between Smyth and Robinson see Stephen Brachlow, *The Communion of Saints: Radical Puritanism and Separatist Ecclesiology 1570-1625* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- 5 Barrie White makes the connection between the ‘further light’ and ‘ways known and to be made known’ clauses and argues that the idea derives ultimately from the earlier Separatist movement, specifically Francis Johnson (White, *English Separatist Tradition*, 123). The connection is also made in Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought 13; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 22.

Scripture in order for it to speak at all. For Scripture to speak anew, it will inevitably speak differently, either from interpretations that have been passed down in history, or from interpretations currently held within other communities of faith. Whereas in the past such interpretive diversity has too often led to ecclesiological separation, I hope that the proposals outlined below will show that, as Baptist Christians, we are called to make ecclesiological space for such diversity, without it necessarily becoming a matter for division.

It goes without saying, I think, that an exploration of this kind has the potential to be relevant to the contemporary concerns of British Baptists (whether this lecture adequately fulfils that potential is a matter for others to judge). Indeed, several contextual aspects of contemporary Baptist life seem, to me at least, to require it.

First, please permit me an anecdotal impression. Whatever the nature of our understanding of biblical authority or inspiration (the default categories for discussion of the Bible among Baptists, not least in the USA), I can say with some confidence that I have yet to meet a Baptist who does not want to take the Bible seriously. This is a vague way of putting it, but necessarily so because Baptists, like other Christians, disagree about the exact terms that should be used to describe such serious engagement.⁶ I have met some Baptists whose claim to take Scripture seriously does not seem to me matched by their practice of

6 Thus for some, it is deeply rooted in notions of inerrancy and infallibility, see, for example, D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (eds.), *Scripture and Truth* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1983); for others, the notion of authority is more appropriate, see N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2005); others will appeal to ideas of inspiration for a discussion of which see Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals* (Biblical Perspectives on Current Issues; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); William J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); David R. Law, *Inspiration* (New Century Theology; London / New York: Continuum, 2001). The classic reformation notion of Scripture as the *norma normans non normata* (the norm over which there is no norm) reminds us that debates about these issues are not concerned with the ontological status of Scripture or its truth claims *per se*, but with the role of Scripture in the life of the church. My own anecdotal impression is simply that within Baptist churches and for Baptist Christians Scripture plays this role, even when there is disagreement about how such a role might be best described theologically.

reading and interpreting Scripture, but the growing lack of biblical literacy in our churches, while serious, is not the focus of this lecture.⁷ More importantly, I have met many Baptists who think that other Baptists are not taking the Bible seriously, but what they usually mean by this, in my experience, is that the other person is not taking the Bible seriously in the way that the speaker believes it should be taken.⁸ And what this usually boils down to is that there is disagreement about how to interpret the text. Baptists interpret the Bible differently, and come to diverse conclusions about what these texts meant and mean for contemporary Christian faith and discipleship. A glance at any book of Baptist (or Christian) history will tell you that it has always been thus.⁹ This impression invites us to consider, I think, whether we might not be able to describe a way of dealing with the Bible that does justice to this diversity and to do so in a way that continues to do justice to the historic Baptist commitment to the biblical texts and their ongoing authority for the church.

Secondly, I believe that this kind of exploration has the potential to help us in the current ecumenical context. Baptists, like myself, who are fully committed to the ecumenical journey must, I think, take seriously the extent to which we are sometimes uneasy partners on that journey with others because we interpret the Bible differently. This is evident in

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- 7 In the 1999 report on Baptist worship practices, Chris Ellis points out that, while the vast majority of churches include the reading of Scripture within worship, the statistics may be ‘an indication of the perceptions of those who replied and are not necessarily a true reflection of current practice’, Christopher J. Ellis, *Baptist Worship Today: A Report of Two Worship Surveys Undertaken by the Doctrine and Worship Committee of the Baptist Union of Great Britain* (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1999), 7.
- 8 ‘A revelation is an interpretation that the believers believe is a revelation, which means that it is one more competing entry in the conflict of interpretations. Believers should accordingly resist becoming triumphalistic about what they believe’, John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (Thinking in Action; London / New York: Routledge, 2001), 22.
- 9 Many early and subsequent Christological debates, for example, involve contested interpretations of the biblical witness: from the Arian/Athanasian debate over the meaning of *monogenês* (John 1.14) through to Melchior Hoffman’s appeal to John 1.14 and Hebrews 7.3 in developing his monophysite Christology [see Klaus Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, ed. Benjamin Drewery, trans. Malcolm Wren (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), 223-229], and its adoption by a number of General Baptists in the 18th century, including Matthew Caffyn.

the way that certain features of Scripture have been foregrounded by Baptists and become the lens through which other parts of Scripture are interpreted. As examples we might note Baptist preference for those Pauline texts in which the church is clearly understood to be the local gathered congregation, as opposed to the universal community of the saints; or our reluctance to consider that those from other traditions who affirm the validity of infant baptism do so on the basis of exegesis and a commitment to the biblical witness.¹⁰ The task of ecumenical hermeneutics is both to explore the richness of biblical interpretations within the different traditions, but also to consider ways of handling the inevitable diversity of interpretation that results.¹¹

Thirdly, no one who is alert to contemporary debates can fail to notice that Scripture, or more precisely the interpretation of Scripture, plays a central role in ongoing conversations about social and ethical issues. While those debates are not the focus of this lecture (and will not be discussed directly within it), it is my conviction that the kind of argument I attempt here is of relevance to them.¹²

10 I have explored the latter in a paper entitled 'Ambiguous Genitives, Pauline Baptism and Roman *Insulae*: Exegetical Resources in Romans to Support *Pushing the Boundaries of Unity*', given to the *Baptists Doing Theology in Context* Consultation in Manchester, 2006. A revised version will appear in a volume entitled *Baptist Sacramentalism 2* to be published by Paternoster Press.

11 For tradition specific studies of biblical interpretation see, for example, *On the Study of Sacred Scripture: Providentissimus Deus* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media), Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Studies in the Believers Church Tradition 3; Kitchener: Pandora, 2000), S.T. Kimbrough Jr, *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005); *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path: The Nature of Authority and the Place of the Bible in the Methodist Church* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1998). On ecumenical hermeneutics see Peter Bouteneff & Dagmar Heller (eds.), *Interpreting Together: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Faith and Order Paper no. 189; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001).

12 On the UK scene there have been a number of attempts to address the question of the nature and interpretation of Scripture in direct response to such issues, not least the debates over issues of human sexuality. Thus my URC colleague, John Campbell takes the approach of helping others to see what kind of interpretative strategies and methods can be used in handling biblical texts (John M. Campbell, *Being Biblical: How Can We Use the*

Finally, I suggest that this exploration is timely because for many Baptists there is some confusion about what we ought to believe about the Bible and how we ought to handle it in the light of what we believe. The point has been made often enough by others so that I do not need to labour it here, but it bears repeating. Baptists have historically confessed and are presently constituted around the theological idea that ultimate authority belongs to Jesus Christ and that this confession shapes our evangelical commitment to the authority of Scripture.¹³ While our theologians have been making this point for generations, I still get a sense that many people 'in the pew' assume that to be Baptist is to believe that the Bible has the final word. I make no pretensions to suggest that this lecture will radically re-orientate such commonly held assumptions, but it is intended as a further voice in support of those who take a more nuanced theological view, and I hope towards the end to make a few practical suggestions that may assist in its wider dissemination.

So, to the argument proper. Taking my cue from the connection that the first hearers made between the 'more light and truth' of Scripture and the notion of the 'covenant of the Lord', I want to see if the task of biblical interpretation can be understood in the light of a theology of covenant and to consider some of the possible implications of such an understanding. My argument will proceed in four main steps. First, I wish to offer an incomplete but adequate description of the current state of affairs relating to the problems of interpreting the Bible within communities of faith. Secondly, I offer my reflections on several key theological themes, all of which are to some degree or another connected with the theme of covenant, drawing out along the way some of the initial implications of these theological ideas in so far as they relate to debates about the nature of biblical interpretation. I then hope to offer a brief constructive proposal which considers how we might understand biblical interpretation in covenantal perspective. Finally, I tease out some suggestions as to how such an understanding might take visible shape

Bible in Constructing Ethics Today? (London: United Reformed Church, 2003) whereas N.T. Wright argues for a proper consideration of Scripture's place in relation to God, Wright, *Scripture*. The present lecture tries to cover aspects of both approaches from a more explicitly Baptist perspective.

13 See Richard Kidd (ed.), *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1996) 29; Nigel G. Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 22-24.

within local churches, our Union and in the world of theological education.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERPRETATION

‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.’¹⁴ How times have changed! The idea that one can separate out interpretation from politics is, of course, naïve and characteristic of an earlier age. We now realize that interpretation *is* political, and that the old certainties about the truth and meaning of texts and thus of life are slowly crumbling as the modern gives way to the postmodern and dominant western discourses are deconstructed through various kinds of feminist and post-colonial alternatives. The setting for any consideration of biblical interpretation must be one that takes seriously both the *instability* of interpretation and its consequent *importance*.

First, we realize that interpretation can no longer be understood as the quest for a fixed, stable, eternal, original meaning of a text. The reasons for this, philosophically speaking, are manifold and need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that we now recognize that the meaning of texts, including biblical texts, are not buried in the texts themselves, waiting to be excavated by biblical interpreters who are able to use the appropriate tools and to work with sufficient care. The meaning of texts arises out of the interaction of texts and their readers. As one biblical scholar puts it:

A text does not come to us wearing its meaning ... on its lapel ... whatever meaning is and wherever it is found the reader is ultimately responsible for determining meaning. It is not something ready-made, buried in the text, and just waiting to be uncovered. Rather, it is something produced in the act of reading through the unique interaction on the text and the particular reader doing the reading, at a particular moment, from a particular slant.¹⁵

14 Karl Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, no. 11, in David McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (2nd edn., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 173.

15 Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 50.

The instability of interpretation is generated by the fact that the reader is involved in the creation of meaning, and that, consequently, the diverse identity, social location, gender, ethnicity, class, theological assumptions and denominational allegiance of the biblical reader will generate diverse interpretations. This does not, as some critics of reader-orientated approaches to hermeneutics suggest, mean that texts can mean anything we want them to mean. It does, however, mean that a certain interpretive diversity is unavoidable.¹⁶

But it is not merely a matter of the diversity of a text's readers. Equally significant is the capacity of texts themselves to generate diverse meanings and interpretations by virtue of their literary qualities. I appeal here to David Tracy's use of the notion of the 'classic texts' as those which 'bear an excess and permanence of meaning, yet always resist definitive interpretation'.¹⁷ In contrast to an approach to interpretation shaped by the concerns of modernism and two hundred or more years of critical biblical scholarship, this category enables us to understand interpretive diversity not as an ongoing story of erroneous exegesis that requires correction by means of yet one more PhD thesis or 'definitive' commentary, but as the inevitable outworking of the fact that the meaning of texts is abundant. The modern discipline of hermeneutics arguably begins at the point where interpretation is understood, not as the application of a certain set of rules in order to ascertain the text's true meaning, but as critical reflection on the act of interpretation itself. It was perhaps Friedrich Schleiermacher who first formulated the fundamental insight that would eventually undo Marx's too easy dichotomy: 'The task

16 I am conscious that I am here summarizing what are complex philosophical and literary critical debates. For an overview of reader-orientated approaches to interpretation and to biblical studies in particular see, as representative examples, Jane P. Tompkins (ed.), *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore / London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), Edgar V. McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) and the survey and critique in Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zonderhaven, 1992), 516-550.

17 David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (London: SCM, 1987), 12. See the fuller discussion in David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM, 1981). The notion of the 'classic' goes back to Schleiermacher.

is to be formulated as follows: "to understand the text at first as well as and *then even better than* its author ... So formulated, *the task is infinite*.'¹⁸ As Paul Ricoeur states: 'It is part of the meaning of a text to be open to an indefinite number of readers and, therefore, of interpretations.'¹⁹

Secondly, if we take these two features of interpretation - the diversity of readers and the ambiguity of texts - seriously, the result must be to affirm the importance of the interpretive task; of the very act of interpretation, understood as the conscious engagement of specifically located readers with texts that are open to multiple readings. To borrow a phrase from the wider philosophical framework within which these hermeneutical insights find their place (for what is true of the meaning of texts is arguably true of the meaning of life), interpretation goes 'all the way down'.²⁰

For some, this state of affairs is perceived as something of a threat. Anxieties about the implications of interpretation are commonly encountered. Of course we all know that as readers we do a certain amount of interpretive work so as to create inevitable diversity. An evening in any church Bible study group (unless it is very badly led) will tell us that. A glance in any theological bookshop, or the shelves of a reasonably well-read minister will give empirical support to the notion that the biblical texts generate multiple meanings and that oftentimes there is little chance of decisively adjudicating between them. Yet the anxieties remain. If we cannot definitively state the one interpretation is right and the other wrong, are we not caught in the sinking sands of relativism in which each interprets as seems right in their own eyes? What does it mean to remain committed to notions of biblical authority and inspiration if we cannot finally decide what these texts mean, for once and for all? Are there any limits to what the biblical texts might mean and

18 F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman (American Academy of Religion: Texts and Translations 1; Missoula: Scholars, 1977), 112 cf. 164 (emphasis mine).

19 Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 31-32. Or again: 'The text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it.' (29-30).

20 The phrase is Richard Rorty's.

does this mean that interpretations of the Bible that, for example, support racism, are as legitimate as those that name it as a sin? Deep down, I suspect, many Baptists believe, for understandable reasons, that the ultimate aim of biblical interpretation is interpretive *stability*, which will be evident at the point when, finally, we reach agreement about the meaning of biblical texts, and interpretive *transparency* whereby we move to a point beyond interpretation itself: a point where the Bible speaks to us so clearly and unambiguously that the hard work of critical engagement with these texts is rendered pointless as we finally discover the ‘plain sense’ or ‘real meaning’ of our sacred texts.²¹ On this view, something is clearly wrong if we have to engage in the hard and complex work of interpretation. We should instead be simply reading the text and letting it speak to us. In contrast to the early English Separatists of Gainsborough or Leiden, we assume that the point of biblical interpretation is to attain a condition in which no further light is possible, and the only ways are ways already known. The fact that attainment to such a condition may well lead us into greater darkness and towards interpretive death, should, however, give us pause for further thought.

In the rest of this lecture, I seek to provide some kind of *theological* response to these understandable anxieties. While such a response could be formulated in a number of different ways, I wish to respond as a Baptist, thinking theologically in ways that, I hope, are recognizably Baptist.²² In the light of recent developments in Baptist theological

21 I allude here to the traditional notion of the perspicuity or *claritas* of the biblical witness.

22 In the following discussion I interact with other biblical scholars and theologians who also see the current context as an opportunity for reconsideration of the hermeneutical task. In addition to those named there, I would add the following: Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (eds.), *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (Scripture and Hermeneutics 1; Carlisle / Grand Rapids: Paternoster / Zonderaven, 2000), Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and the Postmodern Imagination: Texts Under Negotiation* (London: SCM, 1993), Charles H. Cosgrove (ed.), *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretations* (JSOTSup 411; London: T & T Clark International, 2004), L. William Countryman, *Interpreting the Truth: Changing the Paradigm of Biblical Studies* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (eds.), *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology* (London: SCM, 2003), Roger Lundin, Clarence Walhout, and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Promise*

thinking, not least within the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the notion of covenant will rightly play an important role.

INTERPRETATION IN COVENANTAL PERSPECTIVE

Paul Fiddes has recently argued that the theological idea of ‘covenant’ might usefully stand as the central framework and focus for a Baptist way of doing theology.²³ Given the central place given to the biblical witness in Baptist theology, it is perhaps only small leap to suggest that the notion of covenant might also assist us in our understanding of how we interpret that witness. As will become clear in what follows, the notion of a ‘covenantal hermeneutic’ is not new, either as a phrase or a concept. I simply hope that its significance for biblical interpretation can be spelt out in relatively clear terms.

In a programmatic chapter, Fiddes offers a taxonomy of the idea of covenant as the word and idea appear in early Separatist and Baptist Confessions.²⁴ First, there is the ‘eternal covenant of grace’ between God and humanity, focused on, but not limited to, God’s salvific purpose in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The *True Confession* of 1596 makes the point in its declaration that Christ is ‘only made the Mediator of the new Testament, even of the everlasting Covenant of grace between God and man.’²⁵ Second there are the

of Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids / Carlisle: Eerdmans / Paternoster, 1999), Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), James K.A. Smith and Henry Isaac Venema (eds.), *The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood and Postmodern Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), A.K.M. Adam, *Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), A.K.M. Adam et al., *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

23 Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 17-20, 53-56.

24 Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 21-47.

25 See William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1969), 85. We might note at this point that this first understanding can be expanded to incorporate God’s covenant with the whole created order as narrated in the flood traditions of Genesis 9, on which see below and the discussion by Robert Ellis, ‘Covenant and Creation: A Prospectus’, in Anthony Clarke (ed.), *Bound for Glory?: God Church and World in Covenant* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2002), 20-33.

covenant relations that exist within the Godhead. Covenant is here understood as the agreement made between members of the Trinity, a feature especially of the High Calvinism of John Gill and others.²⁶ Thirdly, God's eternal covenant of grace is manifested in the covenant that God makes with each local church. Again the *True Confession* stands as an early witness, claiming that 'to this church he hath made the promises and given the seals of his Covenant, presence, love, blessing and protection.'²⁷ Finally, the term could refer to the act of covenant-making within a local congregation (as with that at Gainsborough) whereby members pledged themselves to God and to each other, to 'walk in the ways of the Lord' and to 'walk together'.

Fiddes goes on to demonstrate that these early traditions are not merely examples of antiquated theological discourse, but contain within them significant theological ideas that, with the help of more recent dogmatic thinking, above all that of Karl Barth, have potential to help the church 'not only to *understand* itself theologically, but to *live* in God.'²⁸ I believe that they also have capacity to help us to understand the task of biblical interpretation in our current context.

Thinking Scripture After Thinking God

The first point to be made is at once the most basic and the most important. We are only able to think about interpretation in covenantal perspective if we first remember that, theologically, our thinking about Scripture finds its appropriate context in our thinking about God and God's relationship to creation.²⁹ Too often, in our thinking about

26 For consideration of how this idea (if not the language) is utilized in contemporary Trinitarian theology see Anthony Clarke, 'The Covenantal Basis for God's Trinitarian Life', in Anthony Clarke (ed.), *Bound for Glory?: God, Church and World in Covenant* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2002), 9-19.

27 Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 87.

28 Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 82. Behind this statement lies Fiddes' wider theological work on the notion of 'participation'. See Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000).

29 Not that these two can be separated in themselves once we take seriously the notion that God is as God is for us in Jesus Christ. See Karl Barth, *CD* II/1, 260: 'God is who He is in his works ... in His works he is revealed as the One He is.' On the whole notion see Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being is*

Scripture, we get this the wrong way round, seeking a doctrine of biblical authority that can then supply the foundation for our subsequent thinking about God. The problems with such scriptural foundationalism are manifold: it tends to reduce scriptural testimony to a set of propositions to which one gives mental assent; it detaches Scripture from God's revelatory work in creation and redemption, supremely in Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh; it flattens out and closes down the possibilities for ongoing theological reflection within the community of faith.³⁰ Instead, with John Webster, we might suggest that:

the proper location for a Christian account of the nature of Holy Scripture is the Christian doctrine of God. In particular, theological assertions about Scripture are a function of Christian convictions about God's making himself present as saviour and his *establishing of covenant fellowship*.³¹

The suggestion that the appropriate framework for understanding God's relation to creation (and thus the nature of Scripture) is a covenantal framework has been made in two other recent works. Michael Horton proposes covenant as a possible solution to the problems of much modern thinking about the God-world relation.³² He argues that:

No more concrete category can unite history and eschatology, the individual and the community, divine and human agency, than the scriptures' own method of contextualization: the covenant. This is the social location of revelation and redemption. Here, there are no 'objects and 'subjects' ... but a covenant Lord and covenant servants along with their shared environment of created reality.³³

in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth, trans. John Webster (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

30 For a critique of scriptural foundationalism see Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

31 John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Current Issues in Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39 (emphasis mine).

32 Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 12.

33 Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 16.

Horton is clear to spell out that such a covenantal understanding also shapes our perception of the hermeneutical task. Scripture must be understood as God's prior *summons* of the covenant community, for in Scripture God speaks and the community finds itself *addressed* by God.³⁴ Importantly for our purposes, Horton recognizes that, as it is so addressed, the covenant community has the responsibility for *interpretation* of that word. This is because:

Single meaning does not entail either uniformity or a uniformly simple meaning. Nor does it require, but in fact resists, the possibility of exhaustive meaning. No interpreter or interpretive community could ever so fully and faithfully interpret the scriptures that there would be nothing left to exegete. Ironically, it is its fecundity that opens itself up to multiple interpretations, but this largesse will limit interpretive options, once we as readers touch ground again. The covenant in its concrete canonical unfolding constitutes that *terra firma*.³⁵

In a parallel argument, Kevin Vanhoozer makes similar suggestions about the ways in which a covenantal understanding of God shapes a particular treatment of the interpretive task.³⁶ Arguing for a covenantal understanding of communication *per se*, and by appeal to Speech-Act theory, he develops an argument in support of the claims that God speaks in Scripture and that interpretation is a matter of inferring authorial intention and ascribing illocutionary acts. In more recent work, Vanhoozer employs the category (found also in Horton) of the divine drama within which Scripture plays the role of the script.³⁷

There is not space in this lecture to engage more fully with Horton and Vanhoozer's work. Suffice it to say that while I grant the basic insight (that Scripture and scriptural interpretation are to be understood in the light of God's covenantal purposes, the so-called divine drama), I have problems with the ways in which those covenantal purposes are construed

34 Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 218-219.

35 Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 180.

36 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove/ Leicester: Apollos/InterVarsity, 2002), 159-203.

37 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

and thus with their description of the hermeneutical task.³⁸ Rather than detailed interaction, therefore, I want to make my own stab at identifying some theological ideas that emerge out of consideration of God's covenantal action, focused specifically on the issue of how we handle the fact of interpretive diversity. In what follows I consider five theological *foci* to this end, drawing on the insights of major theological discussions as the basis for my own reflections.

Covenant and Trinity

We have already noted, in early Baptist sources, the link between God's inner-trinitarian relations and God's relating to the world via the category of covenant. The first obvious point to be made here is that diversity within the created order is to be expected, as constitutive of its single identity as the creation of the triune God. A fully Trinitarian, covenantal theology will include an understanding of the world in which plurality and diversity are integral features. In such a world, human beings, created in the image of God, are constituted not by autonomy but by their relationships with others. To be human is therefore to negotiate the plurality that is woven into God's creation, and to negotiate it in such a way that it reflects the covenantal life of God. The church as the new humanity, called into covenantal relationship and indwelt by the Spirit, embodies this plurality as the body of Christ. And its own divinely-ordered handling of unity and diversity are offered to the world as a witness.

In his study of the practices of Trinitarian theology, David Cunningham is therefore right to plead for churchly practices of *pluralizing* that 'define oneness as most truly "one" when it is involved in a process of self-differentiation, and difference as "different" only

38 My concerns are located first in the sharply Reformed (Barthian) take on the God-world relation which, while retaining an appropriate God-world distinction, ultimately allow insufficient room for any notion of participation or, better, mediation. Secondly, I have reservations about the wholesale adoption of speech-act theory as the best explanatory paradigm of covenantal discourse. As John Colwell points out, '[t]he obvious flaw in this strategy ... is that writing is not speech; the speaker is absent; illocutionary intent here is as elusive as intended meaning' [John Colwell, *Promise and Presence: An Exploration of Sacramental Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 94].

when we can recognize the lines of convergence within it.³⁹ I suggest that biblical interpretation might be understood as such a ‘practice’; one that construes the unity of interpretation as involving self-differentiation and diversity, and where interpretive diversity finds its meaning and purpose in a common orientation to Scripture itself as the medium of the triune God’s covenantal revelation.

In addition, trinitarian reflections along these lines do well to attend to the notion of mediation. In his significant study of sacramentality and the sacraments, John Colwell sets out a progressive case that begins with a trinitarian theology, emphasizing the work of the Spirit in mediating the love of God and moves to an affirmation of creation’s potential to mediate the immediate presence of God.⁴⁰ Colwell then helpfully explores the nature of Scripture that emerges from such an understanding. On this view the human words of Scripture constitute ‘the instrumental means of God’s mediated speaking.’⁴¹ This, however, only takes us so far, as Colwell recognizes in speaking further of the church’s ‘mediated hearing’ and ‘mediated indwelling’ of Scripture.⁴² To this list of how the church as covenant community relates to the mediated revelation of the covenantal triune God, I would add the notion of ‘mediated interpretation’. Such interpretation does not cease to be *human* with all of the associated notions of diversity, provisionality, partiality that this entails, but neither do these features of the interpretive task prevent biblical interpretation from being the means by which God speaks in Scripture – not beyond interpretation, but within it.

39 David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 271. Similar, but by no means equivalent construals can be found in Colin E. Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity: The 1992 Bampton Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (The Matrix of Christian Theology 1; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

40 Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, chapters 1 and 2.

41 Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, 90-105, here p.101. Cf. Barth’s argument in *CD I/2*.

42 Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, 104.

Covenant and Incarnation

These, admittedly slightly inchoate, thoughts may find further support in the recent study by Telford Work.⁴³ In *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation*,⁴⁴ Work proposes a ‘systematic bibliology’ that adopts as its central focus the ‘Analogy of the Word ... the widespread intuition among theologians of all Christian traditions that there is a connection between the two natures of Christ and the divine and human aspects of the Bible’.⁴⁵ Again, there is not space to discuss the nature of Work’s systematic enterprise in itself, but instead to note his belief that a Trinitarian, Christological account of scripture can shape the perception of the task of interpretation.

A theology of Scripture has the power not only to appreciate, defend and preserve the best of Scripture’s uses in the Church ... but also to spawn and inform *new* uses for the Bible in the life of the Church. It can guide biblical interpretation in its widest sense, norming and begetting biblical practices that respect Scripture’s efficacy in mission, discipleship, worship, prayer, discipline and divine revelation.⁴⁶

Unlike many, when it comes to discussing how Scripture might be used in new ways, Work is careful to attend to the issue of interpretive diversity. Recognizing that such diversity has been characteristic of the Christian tradition from its earliest times, and that it is exacerbated by contemporary philosophical rejection of notions of universal meaning or truth, Work argues that:

an adequate appreciation of difference is essential not just for a historically responsible or philosophically defensible phenomenology of Scripture, but also for a truly Christian doctrine of the Church, and of its hermeneutical practices.⁴⁷

43 For those who are still with me in the argument, it is probably about time I asked for your patience with a biblical scholar who is trying to work in the unfamiliar territory of systematic theology.

44 Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Sacra Doctrina; Grand Rapids / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002).

45 Work, *Living and Active*, 15, 16.

46 Work, *Living and Active*, 8-9.

47 Work, *Living and Active*, 240.

Work insists that such a doctrine refuses to identify any *a priori* criteria for adjudicating between different interpretations of Scripture. It will affirm that what the church is given is Scripture itself. This insight:

eases the considerable pressure put upon Christians to explain the endless and radical diversity in biblical interpretation. At least some diversity is evidence of the power and authority of Scripture in setting the agenda in Christian tradition, not evidence of Christianity's own failure, or of a relativistic absence of any criteria for ultimacy between competing interpretations.⁴⁸

What the church is given is Scripture and Scripture alone. Scripture, thus understood, is the instrument of God's covenantal self-revelation. The church, rightly understood, must therefore be construed by its relationship to God-revealed-in-Scripture and not by any particular interpretation of Scripture itself.

Covenant and Creation

I noted briefly when discussing the various dimensions of the covenantal idea, that a full picture should do justice to the relationship between covenant and creation. Theologically speaking, creation is not the place to start. We begin by thinking about God, whose Word speaks creation into being and whose Spirit blows over the face of waters of chaos. Any attempt to ground a theory of interpretation in a supposedly neutral description of the created, or natural order, is bound to be unsatisfactory in theological terms. But the right ordering of theological enquiry should not result in a neglect of the significance of creation as a theological category and, of course, as a primal biblical narrative.⁴⁹

The work of James K.A. Smith is therefore significant in this regard. In his book, *The Fall of Interpretation*, Smith traces the ways in which

48 Work, *Living and Active*, 242. He goes on (pp.247-254) to draw a distinction between diversity and division. The former is not to be equated with the latter, or in covenantal terms, while diversity is an integral part of covenantal relations, division is a breaking of them.

49 Ellis notes that the covenantal idea, while explicitly mentioned in Genesis 9, is 'implied in earlier chapters.' (Ellis, 'Covenant and Creation', 20, cf. the evidence cited on pp.26-27).

the task of interpretation has traditionally been understood in the light of a particular reading of the creation narratives. Specifically:

Interpretation has been a sin. Understood as a postlapsarian phenomenon from which humanity must be redeemed, hermeneutics has traditionally been linked with the curse and banishment from the Garden. Interpretation, in short, is a result of the Fall, is itself a fall – from the intelligible to the sensible, from immediacy to mediation, from reading to hermeneutics.⁵⁰

Smith offers a critique of models of interpretation that, in seeking redemption from its limitations, argue that Christians presently possess (by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit), or will ultimately achieve (by virtue of eschatological consummation) liberation from the mediate, partial and necessarily *diverse* condition of being created human beings.

In their place, Smith, following themes in Augustine, offers a creational model of interpretation. In language that could be otherwise expressed using the basic covenantal distinction between God and creation, Smith attempts to break the too easy identification of *being-created* with *being-sinful*. Of those who would make such an identification he asks:

Would this not make finitude itself fallen? And would not this jeopardize the central distinction between Creator and creature – for how can we be other than finite and yet not pretend to divinity? Does not the portrayal of finitude and temporality as fallen erase any distinction between ‘creaturehood’ and sin? Does this not push evil back to creation itself? Are we guilty for being human?⁵¹

For Smith, such a creational model enables us to view interpretive difference *not* as a problem to be overcome, but as an essential component of what it is to be good, created human beings. If interpretation is built in to the very structures of what it means to be created human beings, then the inevitable consequence is a certain undecidability in relation to those interpretations. Again, Smith makes the point with typical rhetorical flourish:

50 James K.A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 17.

51 Smith, *Fall of Interpretation*, 146.

Given this primordial trust, as the correlate of the goodness of creation, space is made for a plurality of interpretations, a multiplicity of tongues ... When we recognize both the situationality of human be-ing and the fundamental trust of human be-ing, then we are able to relinquish a monological hermeneutic in favor of a creational and Pentecostal diversity, the plurality preceding Babel and following Pentecost.⁵²

The mention of Babel highlights a further point that cannot be elaborated upon here, but that must be mentioned in passing. Consideration of the Genesis 11 narrative strongly suggests that the plurality of languages that YHWH gives in 11.7 is not a punishment for the sin of plurality (so that the punishment simply reinforces the nature of the crime) but is rather God's restoration of the plurality of creation in response to a quest for unity (11.6) that threatens to break the covenant relationship (11.5).⁵³ Acts 2, and the Pentecost event, far from being the undoing of Babel, narrate the Spirit's role in negotiating, rather than overcoming plurality.⁵⁴

Covenant and the New Testament Church

In some senses, a brief discussion of the interpretation of Scripture (here of course the Old Testament) in the first generations of Christianity, may seem out of place. Why focus on a specific historical epoch, when the other constituent elements of our covenantal perspective are more directly theological or at least salvation-historical? The answer lies in the Baptist principle, summed up by James McClendon, of 'the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community'; a motto that suggests that 'the obedience and liberty of the

52 Smith, *Fall of Interpretation*, 183-184. It is the notion of 'primordial trust' that suggests strongly that a covenantal understanding of the goodness of the created order underlies Smith's reflections.

53 Smith, *Fall of Interpretation*, 57-60. He is working with the seminal essay by Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel' in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (London /New York: Routledge, 2002), 104-134. See also Craig Bartholomew, 'Before Babel and After Pentecost: Language, Literature and Biblical Interpretation', in Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (eds.), *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (Scripture and Hermeneutics 2; Carlisle / Grand Rapids: Paternoster / Zonderaven, 2001), 131-170.

54 See the discussion of eschatology below.

followers of Jesus of Nazareth is *our* liberty, *our* obedience.⁵⁵ At the risk of drawing overly simplistic comparisons, there is some validity in asking the question of how the early apostolic witnesses handled the Scriptures they were seeking to interpret.

Pride of place in any such investigation must go to Paul. And consideration of Paul's use of the Old Testament only serves to confirm two points. First, Paul's interpretation of Scripture was one voice in a process of *contested disagreement* about the meaning and significance of these Old Testament texts. This is clear not least in Galatians, where Paul is obviously offering alternative readings of key Old Testament episodes to those provided by the Teachers in Galatia.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Francis Watson has recently reminded us that the extent of the disagreement went far beyond the bounds of early Christianity, as Paul counters interpretations that find expression in the writings of, for example, Philo.⁵⁷ Secondly, and again as Galatians, notably 4.21-31, reveals, Paul feels perfectly at liberty (to use McClendon's term) to read Scripture in such a way as to alter, if not altogether undo, any original sense it may have had.⁵⁸ Richard Hays summarizes Paul's use of the Old Testament as follows:

Eschatological meaning subsumes original sense ... True interpretation depends neither on historical inquiry nor on erudite literary analysis but on attentiveness to the promptings of the Spirit, who reveals the gospel through Scripture in surprising ways. In such interpretations, there is an

55 James W. McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 31.

56 For the best sense of the Galatian Church as contested territory and of the Old Testament as a contested text, see the relevant sections of J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997).

57 Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London/New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

58 On Paul's rhetorical adaptation of both the text and meaning of Scripture see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul 'in Concert' in the Letter to the Romans* (Boston/Leiden: Brill Academic, 2003), Christopher D. Stanley, *Arguing with Scripture: The Rhetoric of Quotations in the Letters of Paul* (New York/London: T & T Clark International, 2004), Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005).

element of playfulness, but the freedom of intertextual play is grounded in a secure sense of the continuity of God's grace.⁵⁹

For Hays, this should reflect our own interpretive commitments, because 'we are children of the Word, not prisoners'.⁶⁰ At the very least, such a connection between the primitive forms of biblical interpretation and our own, stands as a challenge to the quest for any single meaning of a biblical text.

Covenant and Consummation

The God of the covenant is the God of past present and future. Therefore a final reflection is in order around the theme of eschatology and the nature of Christian hope. In relation to the hermeneutical task, appeal is easily and appropriately made to the Pauline confession that 'we now see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13.12). The question prompted by Paul's words is whether interpretive diversity will finally be overcome 'on the last day'?

There are two possible answers. The first, represented by Wolfhart Pannenberg and Anthony Thiselton, is affirmative. On this view interpretive diversity is inevitable, but as a condition of 'the historical situatedness of the interpreter and his or her reading community *within a prior life-world*'; one which is subject to evaluation on the basis of the critique of idolatry, the message of the cross and the eschatological promise.⁶¹ Such interpretation, while inevitable, will be provisional, awaiting the fulfilment of the promise and the 'definitive verdicts of the last judgement'.⁶² However, once again James Smith offers a challenge to the assumption that the journey we are making is a journey *from diversity towards unity*. Picking up Paul's image of seeing *prosôpon pros prosôpon*, he asks:

Is not even the face-to-face encounter mediated by a space of interpretation? that is, does not that face come to me through the space of vision? Do I not only see that which is other, that which is separated by

59 Hays, *Echoes*, 156.

60 Hays, *Echoes*, 189.

61 Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 612

62 Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 618

space, a space that requires interpretation? Do I not always already see the face 'as' something, a seeing that is preceded by hermeneutics?⁶³

Thus, perhaps we ought not even to hope for interpretive unity, but instead to recognize that diversity in heaven may be a fully human, rightly ordered, divinely healed diversity. If this is so, then the church on earth, as those 'upon whom the ends of the ages have come' (1 Corinthians 10.11) may be called to grow into the fullness of Christ and direct themselves to the promise of God, not by seeking to avoid or overcome their diversity in reading Scripture, but by learning to handle it rightly, finding their unity as the Spirit draws them ever closer to God and to one another.

There is much more, of course that could be said, not least in relation to the cross, resurrection and gift of the Spirit. I have, I hope, offered a number of possible ways in which thinking about God in relation to the world relates to the issue of hermeneutical pluralism.

A CONSTRUCTIVE PROPOSAL

Stated briefly, and taking into account the previous theological exploration without which it would make little sense, I now attempt to offer a constructive theological proposal that will shape the rest of this lecture by exploring the simple claim that *biblical interpretation in covenantal perspective should be understood as the church's active, diverse and ongoing engagement with the biblical texts.*

The Church's Activity

In interpreting Scripture we are, in part, playing our role in the covenantal drama of salvation. Biblical interpretation is one of the ways in which we relate to God even as the fact of Scripture is one of the ways in which God relates to the created world. We do this as the church, as the people called into being by God's self-revelation in Scripture. Thus, it is the church as it stands both in its historic continuity and present reality that responds to God's covenantal and gracious revelation. Interpretations offered by the church in the past are not necessarily determinative of

63 Smith, *Fall of Interpretation*, 75. Smith rightly notes that the deeper question here is the relation between nature and grace, creation and redemption.

interpretations offered by the church in the present, any more than the faith or sacramental life of the church in the past is constitutive of the present church's life and faith. Nonetheless the present church cannot ignore, for it is already shaped by, the interpretive decisions of history. To dismiss the history of interpretation is hermeneutically naïve and theologically arrogant. To deify the interpretive decisions of Christian tradition is to neglect what Telford Work calls 'the humanity of churchly biblical interpretation'. What is legitimate, within such a covenantal framework, however, is to disagree with past decisions, not as the final word, but as the consequence of our playing our role in the economy of salvation.

Active Engagement

Interpretation is work. It is a disciplined practice of the church whereby she consciously commits herself to respond to the God who addresses her in Scripture. This implies that the mark of a *biblical* church is not final agreement on the meaning of Scripture, but a shared commitment to the task of interpreting Scripture, predicated on a shared relationship with the God who uses Scripture *and the process of interpretation* as the media for God's gracious self-communication. We have seen with Barth that to insist on the humanity of the biblical text is not to neglect that text's capacity to speak as the Word of God. But the same is true of interpretation – to suggest that interpretation (as a phenomenon of the human, creaturely state) undermines the Bible's capacity to address us as the word of the triune Lord to the covenant community that his word has called into being, this also is to forget the fact that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.⁶⁴ Here is the point where, I believe, we as Baptists need to reformulate just how we approach the whole area of the role of Scripture in our life and practice. If, as we have argued, God in covenant love makes use of created realities for communicative purposes, then this must include not only Scripture itself, but also the process of interpretation whereby Scripture becomes the word of God for God's people the church. The inevitable plurality that arises from God's use of mediated realities (language, text, interpretation) is not a sign of human weakness or sinfulness, but a sign of the goodness of the created order. Thus the gift of the Spirit, who is the first-fruit of creation's final

64 CD 1.2, p.496

redemption, is the gift of plurality, of diversity, of multiplicity. Therefore, *a Baptist, covenantal hermeneutic will permit interpretive diversity and disagreement as a hallmark of the church's life and not insist on particular interpretive decisions as the necessary hallmark of being 'biblical'*.

Disagreement and the Health of the Church

The notion that disagreement is vital to the health of the church is often misunderstood. It does not imply that every argument and every interpretation is as good as another. Nor does it prevent significant levels of agreement. It is crucial to recognize that, far from being a problem in need of a solution, disagreement is in fact central to human discourse and relating. Francis Watson puts it like this:

Disagreement is a familiar social practice in which it is difficult not to engage on a regular basis. It arises from the fact that humans live not in solitude but in community, and that from time to time their respective norms, projects or goals come into conflict ... the possibility of disagreement is inherent in the practice of textual interpretation: for if a text needs interpreting at all, its meaning is not self-evident ... In itself, disagreement is an ethically neutral act. It does not necessarily imply that one party is doing violence to the other... Most important of all, disagreement presupposes a shared concern and thus an acknowledgment of community rather than a retreat into isolation. It always intends its own resolution, even if this can only be attained in the form of a negotiated compromise or agreement to differ.⁶⁵

Stephen Fowl picks up this idea, as he explores the role of biblical interpretation in shaping Christian community. Christian interpretation, writes Fowl, is not the 'reduction of puzzlement' or solving of problems. If it were, there would come a time when interpretation would stop. Instead, Christian interpretation 'is to be more or less a continuous activity'.⁶⁶ Interpretation is the means by which, to use a phrase of George

65 Watson, *Paul and Hermeneutics*, 24-25.

66 Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 161.

Steiner, Scripture is 'safeguarded from the threat of the past tense'.⁶⁷ The inevitable diversity that arises from the need for interpretation, far from being a threat to the Christian community, is actually healthy for its continuing life for 'a tradition that cannot sustain debate, discussion, and disagreement has long since ceased to have a viable future'.⁶⁸

Where Will It End?

Does all this mean that every interpretation is to be welcomed? that we have no way of deciding between them? that there are no interpretations of the Bible that would, for example, place a person or a community outside the bounds of the church? This is the inevitable, and oft-repeated cry in response to the kind of approach I have outlined above. Several points can be made in reply.

First, I have been speaking throughout about the *church's* interpretation and diversity within it. Furthermore, I have suggested that Scripture's role in the church is as the instrument of divine self-revelation. Clearly there are ways of interpreting Scripture that originate beyond the life of the church, but I have not been treating this kind of diversity in this lecture. For the record, I believe that the church has a creational, historical and missional responsibility to attend to biblical interpretation from beyond its own borders, and I further believe that the church can learn from such interpretation.⁶⁹ However, the diversity I discuss here is diversity that occurs *within* those boundaries. I am further aware that the precise identification of which kinds of faith communities are to be deemed *church* is a contested question – but that is what we would expect if interpretive diversity is inherent to the nature of the church's engagement with Scripture.

67 George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London / Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), 42.

68 Fowl, *Engaging*, 162.

69 To give the obvious examples, the church can learn much from academic biblical interpretation written in explicit hostility or benevolent neglect of the needs of the church and has a responsibility to give special attention to Jewish and Muslim interpretations of Scripture. But disagreements between these traditions are of a different order from disagreements within the church. The recent development of strategies of 'scriptural reasoning' attends to some of these issues: see Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene (eds.), *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Radical Traditions London: SCM, 2002).

The most helpful analytical framework for understanding the distinction is that presented by Alasdair MacIntyre in his discussion of traditions.⁷⁰ Traditions, as we have seen, require debate, diversity and disagreement for their own internal health and ongoing sustainability. However the basis for the disagreement is a shared story, identity and set of values that can be modified in the light of the ongoing debate, but that nonetheless continues to shape participants in the tradition. If Scripture functions as the shared story, the covenantal drama in which we play our role as interpretive agents, then arguably the greatest threat to the Christian tradition is not disagreement, but the refusal to engage critically with Scripture itself.

Secondly, all interpretive endeavours operate out of certain basic convictions about the *ends* of interpretation. Within the Christian tradition these *ends* have been variously described, but perhaps the most significant is the priority of love. Augustine, in an early discussion of the church's interpretive identity put it in this way:

So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by understanding you do not build up this twin love of God and neighbour, then you have not yet understood them.⁷¹

Augustine's rubric is predicated on the notion that, however Scripture speaks, it speaks to the ultimate ends of love of God and love of neighbour, what as Baptists we might call the vertical and horizontal

70 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (2nd edn.; London: Duckworth, 1985). The notion of traditions is employed by both Work and Fowl in their respective treatments of interpretive diversity.

71 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, ed. John E. Rotelle O.S.A., trans. Edmund Hill O.P. (The Works of St Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century I/11; New York: New City), §40, p.124. On the epistemological and hermeneutical priority of love see James H. Olthius, 'Crossing the Threshold: Sojourning Together in the Wild Spaces of Love', in James K.A. Smith and Henry Isaac Venema (eds.), *The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood and Postmodern Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 23-40; Mark I. Wallace, 'The Rule of Love and the Testimony of the Spirit in Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics', in Alan G. Padgett and Patrick K. Keifert (eds.), *But Is It All True? The Bible and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006), 66-85.

dimensions of the covenantal relationship. Of course, once again, the issue of what kind of interpretations are genuinely orientated to these ends is sometimes difficult to assess. Perhaps again the metaphor of the divine drama assists us here, as we realize that our response to God speaking in Scripture may well be to *improvise* both as interpreters and as those whose lives are then shaped by those interpretations.⁷²

Finally, I suggest that, in the end, the plea for some kind of fixed point, against which all biblical interpretation can be judged, is rooted in deeply felt anxiety about the implications of not having one. Such anxiety, while understandable, tends to make us defensive. Fearing unfettered diversity, we become reluctant to allow any diversity at all. Stanley Fish, in describing the role of 'interpretive communities' defines the issue in this way:

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. ... The notion of interpretive communities thus stands between an impossible ideal and the fear that leads so many to maintain it. The ideal is of perfect agreement ... The fear is of interpretive anarchy. ... *It is the fragile but real consolidation of interpretive communities that allows us to talk to one another, but with no hope or fear of ever being able to stop.*⁷³

For those who fear that this lecture gives licence to interpretive anarchy, I can only offer the fragile but real consolation that a community formed by the covenantal love of God is a community above all that has the Spirit-filled capacity to talk and to listen, to argue and debate, to remain firm and to change and all the while to remain bound together in covenantal relationship and commitment. If interpretation in community is what we are invited to, then let us welcome the invitation, relish the

72 On the notion of improvisation see the seminal essay by N.T. Wright, 'How Can the Bible Be Authoritative', <http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm> and Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (London: SPCK, 2004).

73 Stanley Fish, 'Interpreting the *Variorum*', *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 147-173, 171-172. Lest others' make hasty assumptions, I am less than content with the notion that readers 'write' texts.

challenge and commit ourselves to ongoing engagement with all that interpretation involves.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF INTERPRETATION

In conclusion, I want to make some tentative suggestions about the ways in which a covenantal understanding of biblical interpretation might shape the ongoing life of Baptist churches, association and colleges. Conscious that these suggestions may be the focus for debate (finally we get to something down to earth!), I ask readers to keep in mind that they share the provisionality that I have been arguing is inherent to any interpretive process.

First, I believe that we need to be more conscious about *creating space* for interpretive diversity. I make suggestions below about how this might be done liturgically, but the point here is a more general one. In many Baptist churches the Bible is too often used as a way of closing down discussion, rather than opening up a conversation. From Bible study groups where the search is for the ‘right’ answer to the questions set within the study material; to sermons that moralize or legalize rather than open up the great drama of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ; to debates in Baptist Union Council or at Assembly where the appeal to the Bible is sometimes little more than a rhetorical trump card – in all these settings and more, we should find ways of providing genuine opportunities for conversation, mutual listening, and disagreement.

This will mean being clear about the fact that our interpretations are inevitably shaped by our experience, presuppositions and context; that, to use a memorable phrase, the lenses through which we read are ‘cemented to our face’.⁷⁴ Much current confusion occurs because while we find it easy to recognize how other people are reading from a particular place, we find it harder to recognize how context shapes interpretation for ourselves. We need to find methods of reading Scripture that are explicit about the ways in which interpretation involves the bringing together of the experience of interpreting this text with our other experiences in life, to the end that each informs the other.⁷⁵

74 The phrase is Abraham Kuyper’s. I owe it to Smith, *Fall of Interpretation*, 43.

75 I owe this way of putting it to Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Saviour: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville / London: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 157-158.

Secondly, the most obvious way of enabling this to happen is for biblical interpretation to take place *as a communal rather than individual practice*. Baptists are still, unfortunately, captive to the idea that their identity as people of the book is intimately tied up with the practice of individual, private, devotional biblical reading and interpretation. It seems to me that such practices are possibly the least helpful indicators of our commitment to the Bible. In recent years, a small number of North American Baptist theologians have issued a call for Baptists to return to communal biblical interpretation.⁷⁶ The need for such a call is equally necessary in our own context. Rather than holding up the daily quiet time as the main focus of biblical literacy and engagement, let our churches create new opportunities for genuine conversation with the biblical texts and with one another about the biblical texts. Let us use our Sundays more creatively to enable genuine interaction between the story of Scripture and the story of people's daily lives. Let us create study materials that genuinely enable groups of readers to open up a conversation with Scripture and with one another. And for those who maintain a daily, private devotional reading of Scripture, let us create opportunities for them to share what they are learning and thinking with others, who are ideally reading the same texts.

Thirdly, perhaps we need to reflect again on ways in which we communicate a *clear distinction* between Scripture and its interpretation, not least in public worship. One suggestion is that we might find liturgical ways of expressing the distinction between text and interpretation. We might look for a recovery among preachers of the practice of praying between the reading of Scripture and its interpretation in the sermon.⁷⁷ History affords us other intriguing suggestions that might find modern equivalents. Chris Ellis, in his study of the Free Church Worship notes that in 1609, the Smyth-Helwys congregation began their meetings by reading Scripture and holding discussion to establish its sense, but then

76 The Statement on 'Reenvisioning Baptist Identity' can be found as an appendix to Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (SBHT 27; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006).

77 My own impression is that this is a practice that is slowly dying in Baptist churches. My own practice has been to pray to the effect that God's past word in Scripture might become God's word for the congregation here and now, but even this does not sufficiently reflect the presence of the interpretive process that enables this to happen.

laid aside the books (closed them?) in order that exposition could begin. Ellis notes that the laying aside of all books, including the Bible, marked the beginning of worship proper.⁷⁸ Is there any mileage in reversing the common liturgical practice of opening the Bible at the beginning of worship, by closing it before the sermon begins in order to communicate clearly that what is happening is an interpretation of those texts (although no less the word of God for the congregation because of that)? And what of the fact that in early Baptist worship there would often be more than one sermon *on the same text*? This again suggests that our forebears (in the case of the Amsterdam congregation, those who actually made the Gainsborough covenant) were aware of the possibility of ‘more light’ within a single act of worship. Far be it from me to suggest a recovery of four to five hour-long services, but there may be ways in which our own handling of Scripture within Sunday worship might give more explicit evidence of a diversity of interpretation, not least through the hearing of different viewpoints in relation to the text.⁷⁹

It is particularly important that those who hold positions of power and who are set apart to give public voice to their biblical interpretation bear in mind the need for a necessary humility and provisionality, for, in the words of John Caputo, ‘we must have the good sense to know our limits, not to inflate our conclusions, and not to put too high a polish on our principles.’⁸⁰ 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 particular will want to find ways of hearing the voices and interpretations of those who lack status, power and institutional authority.

But we do, finally, need to deepen our *commitment to biblical education*, across the board. The best way of dealing with the ‘preacher knows best’ attitude that betrays a deeper disempowerment is to provide

78 The practice of laying aside the texts is mentioned in letters sent in 1608-9 by Thomas Helwys and other members of his congregation. See the details in Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM, 2004), 46-47.

79 At recent Baptist Union Assemblies, the idea of hearing different interpretative voices on the same text has been employed. Such a development is wholly consistent with the theological approach taken in this lecture.

80 John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 2.

quality biblical education as an integral part of local church life. This needs to begin in the ways we enable children to relate to Scripture, but will embrace the whole church in an ongoing process of developing good interpretive practices. Much of the material available continues to treat the Bible as the cheat sheet for secret consultation in the particularly difficult examination called life. Such approaches, rooted as they are in inadequate understandings of God's covenantal relationship with the world and the church, stifle Scripture's capacity to shape our faith, our churches, our discipleship and our mission. This call for renewed commitment to biblical education must also, I believe, be heard in our theological colleges, be allowed to shape curricula and to cultivate future generations of Baptist biblical scholars and scholarship. Although it will no doubt be interpreted as a flagrant example of self-justification, I still hope that we could find ways of increasing the amount of critical biblical engagement available to ministerial students. Furthermore, my own view remains that the capacity to discover new meaning and insight from biblical texts is closely connected to the capacity to study them in their original languages, and I regret that so few ministers now leave college with the requisite skills for biblical interpreters.⁸¹

There are other possible implications, but I leave these for others to identify and share with me in their response to this lecture.

CONCLUSION

We have come a long way from John Robinson and the Mayflower. I hope I have said enough to show that Baptist Christians today should embrace that early Separatist inclination towards the possibility of interpretive diversity. The argument I have presented offers one possible way of negotiating the complex, risky and oftentimes divisive task of interpreting Holy Scripture: the gift of God to the people of God. Too

81 This is not a plea for a return to biblical teaching of a previous era: endless classes on date and authorship and historical background. Rather a strengthening of biblical studies within the curricula of our theological colleges will involve greater attention to the whole area of hermeneutics, along with significant exposure to the theological and contextual dimensions of the interpretive task. However, in the end, the best way of understanding that Scripture as text is the 'other' through which God invites us into conversation, and as such cannot be mastered or domesticated, is to read it in the original languages.

often our disagreement over these texts has resulted in the weakening or even breaking of relationship. A covenantal people will know that relationships based on trust are always susceptible to such damage. But the God who speaks to us in Scripture is the God whose gracious covenant is eternal. Our differences, even those that threaten to divide, should rather provide the impetus to explore the breadth and depth of covenantal relationship. They will enable us to turn towards one another and affirm, in Ruth's words, that 'your people shall be my people and your God my God' (Ruth 1.16).⁸² Together we will want to return to the Scriptures, to read and wrestle, find new points of convergence, and new areas of difference. And in so doing we will find that we are facing God who first turned to us in gracious love and whose love sustains our life together. A church, a Union that learns to do these things will also learn again that the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word.

82 The wording of Ruth 1.16 is a deliberate recasting of the OT covenantal formula found in Exodus 6.7; Leviticus 26.12; Jeremiah 31.33 now in 'horizontal' rather than 'vertical' terms.

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