

THE "PLAINLY REVEALED"  
WORD OF GOD?

BAPTIST HERMENEUTICS IN  
THEORY AND PRACTICE

*Edited by Helen Dare and Simon Woodman*

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## IN APPRECIATION OF “RELUCTANT” PROPHETS

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Baptists, it has always seemed to me, are people of great promise. Indeed, I can think of no other reason why this particular Anglican layman would have chosen to spend four days of his life cooped up with them at South Wales Baptist College in January 2009 discussing the whys and wherefores of Baptist hermeneutics! In this book, I am happy to be able to write, a not insignificant portion of that promise is now being realised in a number of excellent and thought-provoking ways. So much of what is printed here is exactly what I was hoping to hear in person when I originally accepted the invitation to go as an external participant to the colloquium in Cardiff that it is now somewhat difficult for me to find anything useful to write in response—a very gratifying result to my mind. My one remaining question, however, and one to which I shall return below, is simply this: why has it taken the Baptist tradition so long to produce something like this volume?

As I now read through these pages and recall the discussions that took place at the colloquium and the multiple and complex issues involved, what continues to strike me most strongly are the deep wells of creativity, the almost-electric vitality, and the steadfast and hopeful conviction that was consistently shown in the language in use in those discussions and that now appears here for a new audience. Whether it be to do with Bible study, preaching, worship, community-life, covenantal sensibilities, or the role of scholarship, there is scattered throughout these pages compelling evidence that to be a Baptist is at its very best to partake in and of one of the most radical, Christo-centric, counter-cultural, communally satisfying, and life-giving segments of the Christian tradition. I find myself deeply impressed with this volume’s ambition and breadth, both as an example of critical scholarship of a very high order and, perhaps more importantly, as an example of a pastorally sensitive, yet undeniably timely and prophetic call to the Baptist tradition itself. In my view, that call, and the scholarship behind it, must be heard and heeded by the Baptist churches. To ignore or otherwise sideline this

book is simply not a credible option, given what I see as the gravity of their situation.<sup>1</sup>

The flip side of Baptists being viewed as *people of promise* is what I can only see as the unavoidable conclusion that they have all too often fallen short of their potential and have all too often remained a people of *unfulfilled* promise. That this view is echoed in a number of these essays shows that this phenomenon—the disjunction between the radical ideals of the Baptist churches and their concrete realisation on the ground—is not just something that is a product of the biases of this particular outsider.<sup>2</sup> Something is amiss, and perhaps seriously amiss, in the everyday lives of many contemporary Baptist churches.<sup>3</sup>

My own story provides something of an illustration of this point. That I did not begin my faith journey in the Baptist tradition is one of those peculiarities of happenstance that must surely occur with monotonous regularity in everyday life. An adult convert to the Christian faith at the age of twenty-four, the very first church that I ever called my own was a “Local Ecumenical Project,” a joint Anglican-Baptist church in my hometown of Sheffield. Its Anglican/Baptist ministerial team expended much of their catechetical efforts on trying to prevent the growth of a “third tribe” and did not seem to me really to care which of the two “legal” tribes—the Anglicans and the Baptists—any newcomers joined. The lesson I drew from this, understandably but rather ironically given their intent, was that neither infant baptism and confirmation nor adult baptism was of fundamental importance to one’s faith. So successfully did I learn this lesson that it was to be several more years before I was eventually confirmed as an Anglican, an event that owed much more to my desire to identify with a specific

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<sup>1</sup> The UK is obviously my own frame of reference, but I have little doubt that one could generalise the following comments to cover churches further afield.

<sup>2</sup> See the chapters by John Colwell and Sean Winter in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, all of our churches are, by nature, imperfect. In what follows, I want to walk a careful line between resignation about the present and fantasising about an idealist future. I certainly do not expect a full realisation of the promise of the Baptist churches (at least this side of the eschaton). But I do hope for *more* realisation of their promise.

ecclesiastical community rather than to any significant conviction about the forms that such identification required.<sup>4</sup> My story is one of early years of close proximity to and subsequent contact with a significant number of individuals within the Baptist tradition. This might help to explain why I find that tradition both so attractive and so intriguing. Perhaps it is one of the main reasons why I attended the colloquium in Cardiff in the first place. But how then to explain the fact that, as much as I have often seriously contemplated the exchanging of my own lightly-held churchmanship for theirs at various points in the past, there has never been a significant likelihood of that actually happening.<sup>5</sup>

This seems to me to go to the heart of the matter.

Despite the excess of resources within their own dissenting tradition, few Baptist churches seem to me to inhabit the radical and prophetic space that their own language about themselves and especially about their use of scripture clearly implies that they should. When Baptists today describe scripture’s central position within their churches, when they describe how interpretative activity takes place in the communal setting of their worship and in the presence of the Spirit, and when they describe how they subsequently weigh interpretations in their locale and in line with their freedom of conscience, perhaps doing so implicitly by signing up to the Baptist Union of Great Britain’s “slippery”/“nuanced” Declaration of Principle (to adopt Chris Ellis’s memorable phrasing), are they, in fact, describing what is happening in their churches or are they describing *what should be happening* in their churches? I suspect it is often the latter.

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<sup>4</sup> Adult baptism alone has never held any real attraction for me as an individual, and I confess I was rather amused to read Ian Birch’s comment that baptism is not the central feature that outsiders tend to think it is. I suspect it might one day still be worth my considering it as a rebellious act of non-conformity though.

<sup>5</sup> Lest this response be thought that of a (stereotypically) smug Anglican, it is perhaps worth emphasising the point that I remain an Anglican, not through any kind of conviction, but only because I have not yet seen a Baptist church that was sufficiently different as to make it worth the effort to move. No doubt this admission reveals a lot—perhaps too much—about me, but I write it primarily to assure Baptist readers that cheap mockery is not my intention here.

The snapshot of Baptist life that appears in these pages and was clearly on show in the discussions and aspirations being expressed in Cardiff is certainly not the Baptist life with which I am most familiar (much as I would dearly like it to be). Baptist churchmen and women as I have typically encountered them are too often little more than members of pan-evangelical churches. Their institutions differ only slightly, if at all, from other Protestant denominations, being a form of *ekklesia* that is marked by a deep conservatism, a hierarchy of knowledge and spirituality, and rare appeals to an infallible scripture whose meaning has been fixed by outside commentators who are often deeply in thrall to the historical-critical method. In the worship services of such churches, in their church meetings, in their small study groups, and in their individual Bible reading, the radical place of scripture has too often been lost and its prophetic and pastoral call to those communities has been muted. John Colwell surely describes many Baptist churches with a painful accuracy when he writes:

At their worst evangelical Baptists seem to have abandoned the reading and hearing of scripture altogether, wallowing instead in the seemingly endless muddied waters of banal and self-obsessed worship songs of minimal theological merit. It is surely extraordinary and ironic that one can attend a service of worship in a purportedly evangelical church and hear barely more than a few verses of scripture read prior to the sermon.

When one also considers the role that scripture played in discussions about women in ministry in the 1920s (namely virtually none) for example, or the irony of the Baptist World Alliance having commissions on numerous and diverse theological and ethical topics, but none dealing with scripture itself, or the damage caused by the apparent absence of an open debate about human sexuality—so often, as we know, a hermeneutical issue rather than an ethical one—within contemporary Baptist settings, the problem seems to be one that is present at every level of the Baptist world. Is it really the case that scripture within Baptist churches as we know them functions as the church's central witness to its Lord, being interpreted by those who stand among the body of believers and then the truth of the matter being weighed by the many of the community, or is it actually the case that scripture is often simply being silenced or replaced rather than heard?

The inability of many levels of the Baptist tradition/*ekklesia* to be the Christ-led, Spirit-filled communities that they implicitly claim that they should be usually falls a long way short of open hypocrisy, but the feeling that all is not as it should be, that the proffered vision is in fact a largely unavailable one, often seems to an observer from another tradition such as myself to remain a significant bar to their maturity. And in a world that is so attuned to any mismatch between word and deed, such a loss of authenticity turns out to be a highly significant one, both for the contemporary world that simply marches on its way regardless and for the Baptist churches themselves who must pursue their evangelistic efforts with one hand effectively tied behind their collective backs. If I find myself constantly disappointed with the so-called "alternative reality"—the in-breaking Kingdom of God remember—that is on offer within Baptist churches and if I find it to be a pale shade of the radical and sacrificial Christianity that their heritage suggests it could be, then surely so must others.

Is this really all that this radical dissenting tradition can amount to in the modern world? The answer given by this volume is a resounding no. It showcases many possible solutions for the various problems of the Baptist churches, solutions that together are rightly characterised by John Colwell as potentially providing the "distinctive and helpful contribution" of the Baptist tradition to the wider Christian hermeneutical debate, being derived from "principle and historical precedent" and from this radical group's heartfelt "expectation to be encountered by the authority of the risen Christ mediated through the scriptures with an outcome that is transformative for faith and practice." Elements that struck me as being of particular value include the illuminating descriptions of various historical strands of the Baptist tradition; the sketches of the way in which that tradition, in the form of its academics, has interacted with the wider scholarly tradition of biblical studies; and the discussions about the handling of interpretative diversity within the varied, but complementary, frameworks of cultural location, covenantal mutuality, abiding friendship, and worship. But these elements are merely the token selections of this particular outsider, and different readers will no doubt find many other gems worthy of further and deeper reflection. What I feel I can say without hesitation is that participating in the colloquium in Cardiff and reading through

the present volume that is that meeting's most concrete result has given me considerable hope, either that the journey into the Baptist tradition might one day be worth taking for myself or that the Baptists might succeed in taking their own message to the wider Church. And I say here, "Thank God for the possibility of either one!"

Some may view the largely negative description of the Baptist churches presented here as an over-statement of the case by an uninformed outsider. Perhaps this is so. I want to suggest, however, that even were that to be so, it would still be indicative of a rather pressing problem for the Baptist churches. The importance of perception, regardless of its accuracy, is one of the immutable and most unreasonable features of our time. In pursuing the evangelistic goals so central to the Baptist tradition, the perceptions of outsiders about that tradition must surely be addressed. If these churches appear to offer a mere microcosm of the world, perhaps with a penumbra of Christ around the edges, then they will hold little attraction for those who are seeking radical alternatives to the mechanistic and materialistic obsessions of contemporary culture and provide scant prophetic challenge to those who are not seeking any alternative at all. At best, they will begin to function as either the social clubs that so many other denominations have become or perhaps as increasingly mindless sects. At worst, they will die in their turn, polluting the prospects of the remaining churches around them. Baptist churches, in my view, desperately need to find and offer an alternative to our contemporary culture that is as authentic, as Christo-centric, and as radical, as is possible.

To create space for this to happen, Baptist churches will need the help of such "experts" as they have to hand, whether such individuals are theologians, biblical scholars, pastors, sages, or even suitable outsiders ("critical friends?"). These people are needed because Baptist churches and their partner denominations must now begin to think about their various present-day failings and about what must be done to make their communities truly Christ-centred, life-giving, and prophetic. They will need to listen to those who try to facilitate and enhance their church life, however harsh and unreasonable such aid might seem at the time, rather than to those who merely pontificate to them from on high as to what it should be like. They will need to listen to those who will be content to offer

critical comments on, or even voice outright disagreements with, the community's interpretations of scripture without seeking to smother the life out of such readings with their own prideful or lazy interpretations. Perhaps most tellingly of all, they will have to learn to value such people more, publicly encouraging them to speak freely and often, and *submitting* to their arguments and conclusions as the community's developing wisdom requires.<sup>6</sup>

The deepest irony of contemporary Baptist hermeneutics is that although most of the voices that you will hear in this volume are those of individuals who are deeply involved in ministry, ministerial training, or theological education, there was a general sense of reticence in Cardiff about openly expressing opinions about the various issues involved (although, of course, some of those self-same individuals do appear uncompromisingly forthright within these pages). To be sure, prophets in the past have also often been a reticent bunch, with Jeremiah perhaps being the most famous of the "reluctant prophets." But the need here is great, it seems to me, so why is there any reticence at all? Why—to return to the question posed at the beginning of this response—has this volume taken so long for the Baptist tradition to produce?

The answer, it seems to me, might well lie in what Chris Ellis calls "the natural Baptist disinclination to submit to anything," being "dissenters one and all."<sup>7</sup> I suggest that one unfortunate and

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<sup>6</sup> I hope the phrasing here makes it clear that I am thinking primarily about those experts who already exist within the current Baptist ecclesiological framework. The kind of submission I have in mind does not involve genuflecting to positions of authority (such as a bishop, for example), but rather involves a communal recognition of a certain individual's possession of a prophetic mandate to speak to the churches and a resolve to listen to what that person has to say and to act upon it.

<sup>7</sup> Admirable as it might have been if this disinclination had been applied across the board, that has surely not been the case. Many Baptist churches have supinely submitted to a broad strand of pan-evangelicalism that has always been heavily laden with modernistic baggage and that has largely served to divorce scripture from its central role within the worshipping community, a submission that has in fact proved to be a horrible exception to their honourable tradition of dissent. As a general rule, however, Ellis is, of course, correct; Baptists have usually been reluctant to submit to any authority, Christ apart.

unintended consequence of this disinclination has been the creation within those who have unsettling messages for the Baptist churches of a self-induced reluctance to speak the truth too openly and too loudly. Baptist experts, it seems to me, often seem reticent to speak too strongly about what they see, not because they doubt their views, but rather because they tend to regard their roles as being ones that involve cajoling, persuading, and easing the way and not as ones that involve instruction, command, and assertion. They are wary of being counted with the pontificators mentioned above. But here is their quandary writ large. Instruction, command, and assertion are exactly what prophets within a community must do at times because that is exactly what prophetic words require of them. "Thus says the Lord" brooks no reticence at all, and that appears to be a very uncomfortable place for contemporary Baptist experts to be.

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that the time for reticence is long past. Instead, it is time for these prophets to speak loudly and openly, and it is time for the Baptist churches to listen and to weigh their words. It is time for the Baptist tradition to look once again at its riches and to ask if the churches that claim that designation are really all that they are able to be. This volume is an excellent starting point for that necessary task. I commend it without reservation to all of those who are interested in seeking a greater fulfilment of the promise of the Baptists and their tradition. God knows, we could certainly do with it.

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