

THE "PLAINLY REVEALED"  
WORD OF GOD?

BAPTIST HERMENEUTICS IN  
THEORY AND PRACTICE

*Edited by Helen Dare and Simon Woodman*

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PERSUADING FRIENDS:  
FRIENDSHIP AND TESTIMONY IN BAPTIST  
INTERPRETATIVE COMMUNITIES

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The way to truth will entail meeting others and journeying with them. For whatever truth is, it is not something we start with but something we discover.... If truth is to be had, it will only be had in a tradition, within a community, in the company of friends.<sup>1</sup>

*Introduction*

Contemporary thinking about biblical hermeneutics almost inevitably falls into one of two categories. On the one hand, there is a growing concern among many biblical scholars to attend to the ways that readers of scripture have actually gone about their interpretative work. The focus of enquiry is on the interpretative decisions reached, the often implicit hermeneutical principles at work and the contextual factors that shape both of these aspects. This might be termed hermeneutics in empirical mode. It encompasses such important and valuable fields as reception history—both the history of interpretation and wider dimensions of the text's *Wirkungsgeschichte*—and the various forms of contextual hermeneutics. Much of the work exploring Baptist hermeneutics in this more empirical mode remains to be done, although a number of the essays in this volume contain fascinating insights into the ways in which denominational identity and location shape the interpreter's approach to the text and the meaning that arises from that interaction.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David B. Burrell, *Friendship and Ways to Truth* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000) 2.

<sup>2</sup> See the essays by Parsons, Culpepper, and Fiddes in this volume. In addition, see the new series "The Baptists' Bible" emerging from Baylor University Press. The inaugural volume has recently been published: Beth Allison Barr et al., eds., *The Acts of the Apostles: Four Centuries of Baptist Interpretation, The Baptists' Bible* (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2009).

However, a cursory glance at books on hermeneutics from whatever ecclesial tradition serves to remind us that there is much profit in exploring not only how texts have been or are being read, but also how they *might* be read. Here, hermeneutics operates in an explicitly theoretical mode. The attention shifts from real readers to the “ideal” reader, description gives way to prescription, and the focus comes to dwell on the various philosophical, literary, and—in relation to scripture, of course—theological dimensions of the interpretative task. Whether the argument is for a recovery of those theological dimensions—often thought to have been neglected or lost in the period of modern critical scholarship—or constitutes a plea for the continued validity of the historical-critical method, the aim is the same: to suggest appropriate ways of approaching and interpreting the texts that together form the Christian Bible.<sup>3</sup> My own perception is that Baptists have not been terribly good at this kind of hermeneutical reflection either; though again, there is evidence in this volume and in recent publications elsewhere that this situation is beginning to change.<sup>4</sup>

The truth is that for Baptists wanting to think seriously about Baptist hermeneutics, both approaches are needed. Without the historical and empirical research, we are in danger of theorizing about a tradition that has never really existed. Yet without the theoretical reflection, we neglect to address a real question raised by past and present experience: to what extent do Baptists today interpret the Bible in ways that are in any sense recognizably “Baptist”?

It is vital to recognize that our answers to this question cannot be limited to an examination of the particular kinds of interpretative decisions that Baptist interpretative communities have reached. The idea that Baptist identity is primarily shaped by our agreement on a

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<sup>3</sup> An excellent survey of the recent calls for a recovery of the theological dimensions of biblical interpretation can be found in Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, Cascade Companions (Eugene OR: Cascade, 2009). For a response, that insists that the insights and methods of historical-critical biblical interpretation should not be lost see John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> For example see the discussion in John Colwell, *Promise and Presence: An Exploration of Sacramental Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005) 88–105.

series of interpretative decisions is not, I suggest, a particularly Baptist idea. More significant is the need for theological attention to the wider questions of how Baptists approach scripture, how we understand the work of interpretation, how we construe the notions of scripture's purpose and authority, and how our answers to these questions are shaped by and shape in turn our identity as Baptist believers.

In my Whitley Lecture of 2006, I offered an initial attempt to think through some of these questions.<sup>5</sup> In what follows here I want to build on that earlier argument in relation to an issue that crosses the empirical/theoretical distinctions I have been making. As I argued in the earlier work, whatever convictions we hold about what biblical interpretation ought to be, in empirical terms we ought to face up to the fact that all interpretation generates disagreement. Therefore, our obedient commitment to the human work of "churchly biblical interpretation" leads to the inevitable consequence that we will disagree with each other about what the biblical texts mean.<sup>6</sup> This state of affairs then raises an important theoretical question: how do we understand interpretative diversity in theological perspective in our tradition? My contention is that the recent recovery of the category of covenant within recent Baptist theological scholarship offers us significant resources for addressing this question creatively.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sean F. Winter, "More Light and Truth?" *Biblical Interpretation in Covenantal Perspective*, The Whitley Lecture 2007 (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2007). I am grateful to the editors of this volume for providing me with an opportunity to take the argument of this lecture on a further stage, despite my unavoidable absence from the original Cardiff colloquium.

<sup>6</sup> By "meaning" here I am referring to both the "sense" of the text (the stuff of commentaries and exegesis and the cause for significant levels of disagreement in and of itself) as well as the "appropriation" of the text (what it means for the confession, life and practice of the community of faith; the stuff of sermons, Bible studies, church reports and the cause of equal if not greater levels of disagreement). The phrase "the humanity of churchly biblical interpretation" comes from Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation*, *Sacra Doctrina* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2002) 234.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of the importance of covenant for Baptist history and argument in favour of its role as a theological *Mitte* for future theological

Building on my earlier argument. I seek here to consider in more detail the ways in which our ecclesial relationships might be so construed as to allow for the interpretative diversity that we know to be empirically inevitable, but also theologically acceptable. In short, what might a Baptist "interpretative community" look like, in terms of its self-understanding and communal practice?

*Scripture, Interpretation and Diversity*

Any account of the kind of church that seeks faithfully to interpret scripture depends on prior understandings of what scripture is in relation to the church. This is to ask questions about the place of scripture within the divine economy, a topic that has received considerable attention in recent theological work.<sup>8</sup> Given his influence on that recent work, it is perhaps appropriate to allow Karl Barth to formulate the nature of that relationship: "God himself now says what this text says. The work of God is done through this text. The miracle of God takes place in this text formed of human words. This text in all its humanity, including all the fallibility which belongs to it, is the object of this work and miracle. By the decision of God this text is now taken and used."<sup>9</sup>

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work see Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, vol. 13 of *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003) 17–56 and the essays in Anthony Clarke, ed. *Bound for Glory? God, Church and World in Covenant* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> I have in mind especially the work of John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, *Current Issues in Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Webster's students have also been active in this area. See Mark Alan Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics: Mapping Divine and Human Agency* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Richard R. Topping, *Revelation, Scripture and Church: Theological Hermeneutic Thought of James Barr, Paul Ricoeur and Hans Frei*, *Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). Note also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove IL: Apollos, 2002); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 1, pt. 2 of *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956) 532.

John Webster restates the point using language that connects with Barth's wider theology of revelation, as well as with the Baptist emphases noted above, when he writes, "Theological assertions about Scripture are a function of Christian convictions about God making himself present as saviour and *his establishing of covenant fellowship*."<sup>10</sup> Thus, covenant fellowship includes engagement with scripture because scripture is the means by which that fellowship is initiated and sustained. A part of my aim in the Whitley lecture was to insist that the appropriate word for that engagement is *interpretation*.<sup>11</sup> I went on to argue that the location of scripture within this vision of the divine economy directly relates to the issue of interpretative diversity. My proposals were that from a covenantal perspective; biblical interpretation should be viewed as "the church's active, diverse and ongoing engagement with the biblical texts" and that a genuinely Baptist account of the hermeneutical task 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.'"<sup>12</sup>

What lay undeveloped in this account was the issue of how we are to understand the identity and practices of the church in relation to this wider vision of God's gracious self-communication and our response in interpretative work. While I made suggestions about the need to create space for difference, there is more that can be said. In what follows, I want to offer two suggestions about the kind of ecclesial identity and practice that might create that space and facilitate our common participation in the covenantal fellowship of God.

#### *A Community of Friends*

Accounts of ecclesial relations must always move past the necessarily systematic and abstract levels of ecclesiological reflection with a view to considering specific models of life together in Christian community. These models provide us with clues about the

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<sup>10</sup> Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 39. Emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> My insistence is implicitly in debate with Webster (Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 40) who prefers the term "reading." I plan to offer a more sustained theological defence of the notion of interpretation in future publication.

<sup>12</sup> Winter, "More Light and Truth?" 28, 30.

contours, shape, or form of that common life. Life in the church is embodied, and so accounts of the church must include some guidance as to the shape of the body's existence in the world. The aforementioned reality of interpretative diversity within the body of Christ and the consequent disagreement that is a permanent hallmark of both the historical and present forms of the church's life invite a more specific consideration of the question of models and patterns. Exactly how might we describe the church in such a way as we allow appropriate space for diversity and disagreement? What is the shape of the church's social existence in the light of its diversity? These questions are pertinent at every level of ecclesial life, whether this be the local congregation, the regional association, or the national or global denomination/communion. Ultimately, of course, it is deeply relevant to the ecclesiological issues underlying the ecumenical vision.

Several alternative models are available for our consideration. For our purposes, however, it is illuminating to compare two contrasting types. The first is the church as "household." New Testament scholars have long used this category to explore the social dimensions of early Christian community. The designation of early Christian gatherings as "house churches" says as much about the social structure of those gatherings as it does about their location.<sup>13</sup> Central to early Christian adaptation of household structures was the preservation of the idea of "the head of the household...[who] would exercise some authority over the group and have some responsibility for it."<sup>14</sup> Although Christian communities found ways of modifying and chastening the absolute authority of the *paterfamilias* and the hierarchical framework of the Greco-Roman household, nonetheless the basic patriarchal structures often remain in place.

In contrast, the New Testament also bears witness to models of community life that offer an alternative to the household model.

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<sup>13</sup> See Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1983) 74–84; Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, trans. John H. Schütz, *Studies of the New Testament and Its World* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982); Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Early Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Meeks, *First Urban*, 76.



Recent emphases on the idea of *koinōnia* as crucial to contemporary ecclesiological reflection often forget that the use of that term in the New Testament is rooted in models of social relationships from the wider Greco-Roman world. While it is true that the term can be used in ways that are consistent with an unequal distribution of authority, a strong case can be made for understanding fellowship language as the language of reciprocal and mutual *friendship*.<sup>15</sup>

In an essay exploring the relationship between covenant and community, Keith Clements describes the differences between these two models. On the one hand:

There is that kind of church which stresses a particular system of authority at a local level. There is set out in the New Testament a definite order, most often seen as involving 'elders'. The mark of true church membership is the recognition of the authority of the elders for belief and practice. This scheme of authority is, in conformity with the New Testament, one in which men are set over women. The prime need of the hour is to recover and preserve this definite, fixed and unalterably God-ordained pattern. We may describe this as the *government-church*.<sup>16</sup>

Noting that the "government" church will often adopt the language of family as a way of preserving often implicit models of relationships that are based on submission and the need for "fathers," Clements argues that the tendency of such churches is always toward an "assumed finality" of truth.<sup>17</sup> This is contrast to models of church in which "the mark of the church is the love, caring

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<sup>15</sup> The question of which model of social relations underlies the Pauline notion of *koinōnia* is a matter of debate. The main alternatives are: the legal idea of consensual *societas*; the relations between patron and client; wider conventions of social reciprocity; the notion of "friendship" (on which see below). See the discussion in Klaus Schäfer, *Gemeinde Als 'Bruderschaft': Ein Beitrag Zum Kirchenverständnis Des Paulus*, ser. 23, vol. 333 Europäische Hochschulschriften (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989). The language and conceptuality of *koinōnia* has been especially influential in recent ecumenical discussion. See the account in Lorelei F. Fuchs SA, *Koinonia and the Quest for an Ecumenical Ecclesiology: From Foundations through Dialogue to Symbolic Competence for Communionality* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Keith W. Clements, "The Covenant and Community," in *Bound to Love: The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes et al. (London: The Baptist Union, 1985) 57.

<sup>17</sup> Clements, "Covenant and Community", 60.

and acceptance by members one for another. Matters of doctrinal belief are secondary to this ideal. Arguments about the divinity of Jesus or the inspiration of the Bible are 'mere theology.' What matters is the 'spirit of Jesus' expressed in the relationships and attitudes of the members. We may describe this as the *fellowship church*.<sup>18</sup>

One might think that this model of church is to be preferred. Yet, as Clements notes, this model must be judged in the light of the fundamental belief that "it is in Jesus Christ himself that God has established his covenant relationship with us, and calls us to live in community with one another and with God."<sup>19</sup> Fellowship can become an end in itself and "a community which despises matters of objective belief for the sake of 'fellowship' will eventually run out of 'fellowship' too, drifting towards superficiality, triviality and complacency."<sup>20</sup>

Using Clements' typology as a guide, we are able to pose the more specific question of how scriptural interpretation should be handled in the church: is there an alternative way of handling the difference and conflict that arises from the church's interpretative work, one that avoids the patriarchal "appeal" to a central authority on the one hand and, on the other, a reluctance to pursue issues of meaning and truth? In the latter scenario, it seems that either we are left with a position in which the parties "agree to disagree because we love each other" or with the suppression of conflict, a strategy often detrimental to the health of a community. I contend that there is a more nuanced way of describing the interpretative situation in which the church finds itself, and of conceiving of the nature of the interpreting church. The model we need is essentially a modification of the fellowship type, rather than the "government" type. Recognizing that the basic structure of a covenantal ecclesiology, namely that relationships within the church are participation in God's covenantal love for God's people, I offer for consideration an understanding of church that draws on the traditions of *friendship*.

In recent years, a number of thinkers about social relations in the church have rediscovered the notion of "friendship" as a helpful

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 59.

category for their reflections. The notion that Christian identity might be construed in terms of friendship with God is an idea with a long history and influential legacy.<sup>21</sup> More recently, the category of friendship has been expanded to draw in issues surrounding relationships between Christian believers.<sup>22</sup> There are several reasons why the model of friendship might prove to be a particularly fruitful way for Baptists to conceive of social relations within the Christian community, but the most persuasive lies in the idea that it offers an embodied form for our fundamental convictions about covenant.

One recent proposal looks, at first glance, to be relevant to this approach. In an interesting article, Jacqueline Lapsley has argued that “the friendship between God and Moses offers a model of covenant faithfulness for the whole people of God.”<sup>23</sup> Taking Exodus 33:7–11 as a starting point, Lapsley notes how Moses is granted a face-to-face meeting with God, a divine-human encounter characterized by immediacy and intimacy. This encounter, when set in the context of the wider Pentateuchal account of the relationship between Moses and God, is best viewed through the category of friendship and translated accordingly.<sup>24</sup> There are four aspects of the God-Moses relationship reflected in this encounter: habit, reciprocity, self-assertion, and emotion.<sup>25</sup> Together, these features suggest a form of covenantal relationship based less on demand and obedience—the

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<sup>21</sup> See the survey in E. D. H. Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> See the following discussions: Gilbert C. Meilander, *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Burrell, *Friendship*; Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Jacqueline C. Lapsley, “Friends with God?: Moses and the Possibility of Covenantal Friendship,” *Interpretation* 58/2 (April 2004): 117–29.

<sup>24</sup> See Lapsley, “Friends with God?” 118–19. Most English translations recognize that, even though the Hebrew phrase reads literally “a man to his neighbour,” the idea of friendship is implied by the character of the encounter as it is presented in the narrative and therefore translate “as one speaks to a friend” (so NRSV). The notion that a “face to face” divine-human encounter is ultimately an encounter between friends has significant eschatological implications in the light of Paul’s articulation of the Christian hope in 1 Cor 13.12, on which see Winter, “*More Light and Truth?*” 27–28.

<sup>25</sup> Lapsley, “Friends with God?” 121–27.

terms in which covenantal relations are often discussed—and more on the kind of encounter that is common in friendship. Lapsley concludes that “[o]bedience without the sustenance of habitual communication, reciprocity, self-assertion, and a deep and broad emotional life leave Israel, and ultimately the church, perpetually disobedient to a covenant that does not reach their innermost being. Only a covenantal friendship with God could sustain them, and us.”<sup>26</sup>

It would perhaps be profitable to explore these aspects in relation to the focus of the present essay. A commitment to habitual encounter; the significance of genuine mutuality; the protection of a space that permits each partner to assert themselves and that, when combined with reciprocal commitment, permits a fully honest exchange of views; and the recognition of the importance of feeling—these are values that might shape a community of faith that understands person-to-person relations in the light of the divine-human encounter and that seeks to handle diversity in appropriate ways. However, Lapsley’s essay is less helpful than it first appears. Her focus is, understandably, on the divine-human encounter. This means that her comments about how human relations might be thought to reflect this encounter do not go beyond an insistence that they ought to do so. Therefore, she does not explore the ways in which a covenantal friendship model might relate to the questions of how diversity and interpretative pluralism might be handled within the community of faith.<sup>27</sup> Finally, we note that Lapsley assumes rather than demonstrates that these characteristics of the friendship encounter of Exodus 33:7–11 are consistent with aspects of Israel’s covenantal theology as these are reflected elsewhere in the canonical witness.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, she articulates a central point that can be

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>27</sup> Lapsley suggests that “the friendship between Moses and God is a model for covenantal faithfulness, and so a model for us as we strive to read scripture faithfully” (“Friends with God?” 127), but she nowhere develops this point.

<sup>28</sup> This reveals itself in some exegetical problems, not the least of which is Lapsley’s emphasis on full reciprocity in the God-Moses relationship. There is a conspicuous lack of attention paid to the significance of Exodus 33:17–23 (where Moses is refused a sight of God’s face) and so she underestimates the

developed in what follows: that the friendship between Moses and God is ultimately a legitimate way of speaking of the covenantal relationship that God initiates with God's people.

Perhaps some closer attention to the wider dimensions of covenantal theology in the Old Testament will take us further. Here, I turn to a summary of that theology that I, and many others, have long found persuasive. For Ernest Nicholson, in his study of *God and His People*, the covenant between YHWH and Israel is encapsulated in the idea that:

Religion is based, not on a natural or ontological equivalence between the divine realm and the human, but on *choice*: God's choice of his people and their "choice" of him, that is, their free decision to be obedient and faithful to him. Thus understood, "covenant" is the central expression of the distinctive faith of Israel as "people of Yahweh," the children of God by adoption and free decision rather than by nature or necessity.<sup>29</sup>

Nicholson's definition suggests crucial features of the covenantal relationship between God and God's people that I suggest are constitutive of mutual relationships within the community of faith. These features are, in fact, key facets of friendship, and their identification enables us to describe something of the shape of the Baptist interpretative community.

First, covenant relations are entered into by two parties who are fully aware of the fact of difference. In Nicholson's definition, this is expressed negatively and with specific reference to the relationship between God and Israel; there is neither a natural or ontological equivalence. Yet, this observation carries equal weight when we talk about our relationship with one another. Difference is built in to those relationships because attempts to overcome that difference, to make the other the same, constitute a shift away from a covenantal understanding to one based on what Jacques Derrida has called

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extent to which this later text serves to qualify the insistence on the habitual and reciprocal nature of the God-world relation.

<sup>29</sup> Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) 215–16.

"natural fraternity...a schematic of filiation, stock, genus, or species, sex...blood, birth, nature, nation."<sup>30</sup>

Second, God's covenant with Israel is characterized by free choice and not obligation; it is entered into freely and, as such, can also be left freely. So covenant relationships depend on mutual choice and reciprocal commitment and are only sustained through the ongoing participation of initially separate parties. Two implications follow. On the one hand, the central attitude between two parties, necessary for the preservation of a covenant relationship, is trust. On the other hand, covenantal relationships, thus defined, will always resist other construals of human relationships, that is those based on "nature" and "necessity." Thus, at the centre of relationships within the covenantal community will be an inherent tension between security and vulnerability, the results of loving and being loved.<sup>31</sup>

Friendship shares all of these characteristics. Christian friendship is sustained less in the common search for pleasure, utility, or virtue that were the binding ingredients of friendship in the philosophical tradition.<sup>32</sup> Instead, the mutual choice and reciprocal commitment of our friendship with each other are the means by which we participate in the loving friendship of God toward us. Trust remains at the heart of things, now restated in the

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997) viii. Those wishing to consider how the category of friendship offers resources for philosophical, ethical, and political reflection would do well to study Derrida's analysis. He names "the indivisible essence of perfect friendship" as "a fraternity of *alliance, election...of covenant, of spiritual correspondence*" (*Politics*, 181, emphasis added).

<sup>31</sup> Note also that covenant functions in ethical terms as a warrant for certain kinds of partiality: the idea that we owe some people a debt of care, support and friendship more than others. Theologically, this becomes a way of exploring the relationship between creation and election. In ethical terms it relates to notions of advocacy. See the discussion in Marilyn Friedman, *What Are Friends For? Feminist Perspectives on Personal Relationships and Moral Theory* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> See the classic account of the kinds of friendship by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 8 (1155a–1163b). Although the point cannot be developed here, Aristotle's close identification of friendship with *koinōnia* (see 1159b 31–32) is deeply suggestive for understanding aspects of New Testament ecclesiology.

more commonly found Christian language of faith. God's faithfulness to us is met with our faith in God, and this enables faithful commitment to those to whom we are bound in covenant relation.<sup>33</sup>

David Burrell explores these aspects of friendship in ways that direct our attention to the theme of interpretative disagreement. As friends share with one another, he writes, "Such a sharing has more to do with intention than with agreement. Indeed as friendship unfolds, it offers a paradigm for *sustaining a relationship beyond disagreements*."<sup>34</sup> Friendship provides the context within which we can embark on a "quest for understanding." Communities of friends will travel together on this journey "to the extent that they offer the kind of mutual support which alone can allow us human beings to escape the imperious demands of our need for certitude." Burrell's description of the Christian community of friends seems to echo the language of early Baptist confessions: "Friendship in Jesus does not rest on agreement so much as on an embracing good which is promised to each so long as they are willing to submit to the rule of learning from the Word of God and of testing their understanding of that word with one another."<sup>35</sup>

In situations of disagreement within the Christian community, there is often the search for a solution via adjudication. Both parties look for, or more commonly they believe themselves to be, a person or persons who have sufficient authority to be able to resolve disputes and establish clear boundaries. This is as true in the interpretative task as it is in other aspects of church life. In structural terms, the need for adjudication reflects a model of church in which some—usually a few—are invested with or claim the relevant authority by virtue of their title or role or education or gifts: the "government church" mentioned by Clements above. Their

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<sup>33</sup> As Jurgen Moltmann puts it, "Nor is friendship an alliance for mutual advantage. Between friends there is only the promise to walk with each other and be there for each other, in other words, a faithfulness that has to do not with acting and possessing but with the individual person and with being," *The Open Church: Invitation to a Messianic Lifestyle* (London: SCM, 1978) 52.

<sup>34</sup> Burrell, *Friendship*, 5, emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

judgment on the issues under discussion thus are held to be determinative of the identity, beliefs, and practice of the community. For Baptist communities, there is always the temptation to fall back into these models of church life, often articulated using unreflective notions of family that look for a central and definitive location of authority in something or someone other than Jesus Christ. When interpretative disagreement is on the surface of our church life and when pressures within and without the church call for definitive statements and clear positions, the temptation can seem to be overwhelming. And yet an understanding of the church as a community of friendship provides us with resources for resisting this solution to the conflict that arises from their diversity. Central to the Baptist vision is the idea that the identity, belief, and practices of the church are not determined by these forms of authority or by the interpretative decisions that are reached by appeal to them, but they are instead the result of the participation of a covenanted people into the life of God.<sup>36</sup> Friendship is a form of relationship that allows space for all this because as we learn to become friends with one another, we are, in fact, responding to God, who in Jesus Christ calls us God's friends.

What does this look like in practice? Well, perhaps if Baptists can learn to read as friends, we will do what friends often do—think for example of members of a book group or a dinner party conversation discussing a recent novel. We will find ways of sharing our views and interpretations honestly and openly, of listening to alternative views and interpretations, of allowing the richness of the conversation to take us back to the text with new eyes, and of agreeing to disagree, and all this without threatening the free yet committed relationship that friends share.

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<sup>36</sup> There are a number of different ways of exploring the point raised here. I note in passing that the form of the "government" type of church is fundamentally patriarchal, and that it is unsurprising to note that friendship has been an important theme for some feminist writers on ethics and theology (see Friedman, *What Are Friends For?*; Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *Rediscovering Friendship*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 2000). For a helpful articulation of the ways in which authority might function in a covenant / friendship / fellowship model of community see Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 83–106.



Or is this being ridiculously naïve? What about the truth claims of the Bible? What about the fact that the interpretation of the scriptural texts is actually about attending to the word of God? Doesn't that render the whole idea of friends agreeing to disagree out of the question?

*The Conversation of Friends: Persuasive Testimony*

How do friends talk to each other? How do friends discuss issues of truth in ways that avoid the appeal to authorities—other than the authority of the one whose truth is sought—but that also move beyond the kind of exchange of views that, precisely because it seeks to preserve the relationship at all costs, in the end cannot explore issues *as* truth? What is needed is a way of talking about our talking together that is rooted in a theological account of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of covenant and that moves us beyond the quest for interpretative certainty and the compulsion to avoid interpretative work and concentrate on being nice to each other. The category of friendship offers a model rooted in a covenantal understanding of the God-world relation and resulting ecclesial relations. It also, I suggest, offers a true account of what is actually taking place when we disagree about what scripture means.

David Tracy, in his work on *Plurality and Ambiguity*, proposes a model of scriptural engagement that is suggestive for these purposes: the notion of conversation. While Tracy's concern is to explore dimensions of the interpretative task *per se*—whether it be construed in hermeneutical, historical or theological ways—he nevertheless makes several observations that are pertinent to my argument.

Tracy recognizes the inevitability of interpretation and interpretative diversity and conflict. "To understand at all is to interpret," he writes, and consequently "to interpret is to converse" and "to give an interpretation is to make a claim."<sup>37</sup> What are we then to do when different interpretations are offered, each of which make a claim on the other and on those to whom we are bound but from whom we differ? In these situations, Tracy suggests, we discover the "difficult demands of the reality we call friendship,"

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<sup>37</sup> David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (London: SCM, 1987) 9, 25.

saying, "Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it."<sup>38</sup> Conversation, thus understood, is not the exchanging of views or interpretations. It is the encounter with difference in which I allow for the possibility that I might be wrong and might have to change my views on the truth, or my interpretation of the text. As friends converse we discover "the other as other, the different as different" and therefore "the different *as possible*."<sup>39</sup> Within the overall framework of conversation, Tracy suggests that there are moments when the conflict of interpretations is such that argument becomes necessary. Argument is best seen, less as a departure from conversation, or an absolute interruption of it, and more as an intensification of the very process enshrined in conversation:

Argument is a vital moment within conversation that occasionally is needed if the conversation itself is to move forward.... [It] assumes the following conditions: respect for the sincerity of the other; that all conversation partners are, in principle, equals; saying what one means and meaning what one says; a willingness to weigh all relevant evidence; a willingness to abide by the rules of validity, coherence, and especially possible contradictions between my theories and my actual performance.<sup>40</sup>

To speak of conversation and argument in this way is, I propose, to speak of the requirement to give testimony. A person who says "this is what scripture means" to another is, from this perspective, saying neither "agree with my interpretation or we must break relationship" nor "this is what I think the text means but I am telling you for information only." To bear witness is to seek to persuade the other that my witness is true, which is another way of saying that exegesis is argument, that to interpret is to make a claim and that every act of interpretation is in some sense an act of proclamation.

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<sup>38</sup> Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 19.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, cf. 93.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 26.

Of course, understanding our relationship with one another in this way will make some feel vulnerable, while others will exploit their power in order to take advantage of the situation. The fact that rhetoric often takes unpalatable forms does not mean that we can escape the reality of our situation. For Baptist communities, it is vital to recognize that it is the persuasive testimony of scripture that calls the church into being.<sup>41</sup> To bear witness to one another fully, truly, and openly is a risky strategy. However, far from being a threat to the unity and identity of the church, this mutual witness is constitutive of its identity, for in the work of interpretation we play our part in the covenantal drama of God's saving action in Jesus Christ.

### *Conclusion*

In sum, the church's existence depends on the covenantal action of God who calls this community into existence and whose love sustains the covenantal relationships within the community. To speak this way of the church is to speak of it as a community of friends and thus as a place where diversity, disagreement, and even conflict are inevitable, but not ultimately destructive. Scripture's authority within this community is established by virtue of its role within God's covenant-making relationship with us. Thus, our diversity, disagreement, and even conflict over the meaning of scripture are inevitable, but not ultimately destructive. Although the church is often tempted to seek definitive adjudication of competing interpretations, this is a temptation that ought to be resisted. Although the conflict of interpretations can be avoided by an appeal to the all-pervading importance of good relationships, the inevitable downplaying of the need for the church to search the scriptures is too high a price to pay.

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<sup>41</sup> The notion that scripture itself is a "testimony" is of course most fully developed by Barth. See e.g. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 1, pt. 1 of *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley trans., 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975) 111–20. The corollary is that all theological work ought to be understood as rhetorical in nature. See David S. Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

When we read, interpret, talk, and argue about what the Bible means, we are actually engaging in the process of conversation and argument that should, when rightly understood, hold the church together. For as long as we are responding to *these texts*, we are responding to the God who speaks through them. There is always the need for vigilance, lest scripture is elevated or demoted to a place that distorts its overall role within the divine economy. But as we read in the community of friends, we do well to heed the imperatives to "be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> This version of Bernard Lonergan's "transcendental imperatives" is attributed by David Tracy (Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 19 n. 29.) to Bernard Lonergan SJ, *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973) 231. However, the text there reads, "Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible." (cf. 20, 53, 302). I prefer the rhetorical flourish of Tracy's version, but recognize that it may reflect oral tradition rather than anything that Lonergan wrote.

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