

Contents

An Overview of Brueggemann's Method.....	2
Post-Exilic community.....	7
Roots of Baptist Community.....	12
Contemporary Baptist Community.....	16
Baptist Community in the light of Studies in Method, Post-exilic community, Historic and Current Theology and Practice.....	20

An Overview of Brueggemann's Method

This study uses Brueggemann's depth of insight into the field of biblical studies to look at the dynamics at work within communities, specifically in relation to how the resurgent post-exilic community relates to the developing nature of community in the Baptist Union of Great Britain. The process of correlating these dynamics challenges current Baptist practice and raises questions about where it will lead the denomination as a whole.

Introduction

Getting a firm grasp of his (Brueggemann's) theology is not an easy task, not least because his publications never quit, and despite much consistency, his understandings are always on the move.¹

Terence Fretheim

It is commonly understood that theologians bring to bear their own assumptions and theological approach to the subjects that they study, Brueggemann alludes to this in suggesting there is "no interest free interpretation."² Our study of Brueggemann will reveal some of the core themes and assumptions that weave through the complexities of his arguments. As Fretheim indicates, it is beyond the bounds of reason to expect that in this work we will assess every aspect of Brueggemann's work. This study will rely on some of his most significant publications and collections of articles³. Using these sources we will seek to identify his core assumptions and approach.

Underlying Assumptions

Canonical View

Brueggemann approaches Scripture as canon. He does not impose on the text theories about its composition and authority, allowing the final form to speak into both its context and his application. Within the academic community there is a breadth of opinion on the authority of Scripture as "God's Word". Brueggemann's approach indicates that it is right and proper for communities of faith to regard Scripture as the word of God⁴. This is not to say that Brueggemann will hold to the traditional interpretation of each Scripture in order to be true to a particular tradition, whether that be Evangelical, Conservative, Liberal or Fundamentalist⁵.

1 In: Beal & Linafelt p.24

2 Brueggemann: *Theology of the Old Testament* p.63

3 see bibliography

4 Birch, Brueggemann et. al. *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* p.18-19

5 Beal & Linafelt p.3-4

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

His work on Isaiah⁶ will act as a brief case study here. The Isaiah commentaries set out the critical models of interpretation of Isaiah. He indicates his preference for the canonical approach, justifying it thus:

*A canonical approach is not a return to the traditional approach. The newer perspective seeks to understand the final form of the complex text as an integral statement offered by the shapers of the text for theological reasons.*⁷

When Brueggemann researches Scripture, without fail he treats it in its final form, although it is clear from his writing that he has grasped the arguments of the critical approach. This is one key distinctive of his writing. Before analyzing the text in depth he will set out the scholarly understanding and recognising the points at which he agrees and differs. A classic example of this is the last chapter of "Old Testament Theology"⁸. This analysis of the approach of others sets his course for study but does not bind him in interpretation. His treatment of Isaiah 53 is a good example. He observes and sympathises with the Christian tradition of identifying the suffering servant as Jesus but does not allow that tradition to unduly colour his interpretation of the text⁹.

Contemporary Application

Brueggemann prefers Scripture to speak into the situation in which it is being read, rather than remain in academic argument. His collaborative project "A Theological Introduction to Old Testament Theology" is explicit in this regard¹⁰. Scripture becomes the active resource for faith communities as the word of God when it is sensibly applied and interpreted for that given community. These convictions are demonstrated in the number of works addressed to contemporary situations¹¹. In "Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles" he notes the changed social situations that face many preachers and their hearers, stating his longing that they might "catch up" with different presuppositions and urgencies¹². The book goes on to unpack his theory that social change has left the church in a similar situation to the Biblical Israelite exiles in Babylon. The book is packed with contemporary application; it is not some

6 Brueggemann: Isaiah 1-39; Isaiah 40-66 and "Unity and Dynamic in the Isaiah Tradition" in Old Testament Theology p.252-269

7 Brueggemann: Isaiah 1-39 p.4; cf. House p.274; Moyter p.25-30 for consciously conservative approaches.

8 Brueggemann: Old Testament Theology p. 296-307 Identified as such by Millar p. xvi

9 Brueggemann: Isaiah 40-66 p. 149

10 Birch: p.11-12

11 The Bible and Postmodern imagination; Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested truth in a post Christian world Cadences of Home: Preaching among exiles are examples

12 Brueggemann: Cadences of Home: Preaching among exiles p. xviii

dull enunciation of a theory that is unconnected with the real world. At each turn Brueggemann seeks to apply his thesis to the contemporary church.

Theological Distinctives

The complexities of Brueggemann's approach, influenced by the diversity of his reading and academic discipline¹³ and the heterogeneous nature of the Bible do not enable precise identification of all the themes which are evident in his work. There are consistent and recurrent themes which present themselves on a regular basis in his work enabling us to trace common lines of thought in the context of the whole. Four of those recurrent themes are Exile, Covenant, Rhetoric and Social Power.

Exile

*The Old Testament in its final form is a product of and a response to the Babylonian Exile.*¹⁴

Old Testament scholars working from this premise will have the exile emanating from their work. Brueggemann clarifies his statement by tracing the completion of the Torah as a response to exile and indicating that social re-evaluation enabled the exiled community to look to their text whereas previously the community had looked to city, king or temple¹⁵. Echoes of the exile are visible both explicitly and implicitly throughout his work. We have seen a prime example of this overt expression in the homiletical work "Cadences of home" where he sociologically compares the situation of the exiled communities to that of the contemporary church. In the commentary on Genesis, one of his earliest publications, exile is not overt, yet it underlies his interpretation which emphasises the retelling of the story both in its final form and in the application of it to contemporary situations.

Covenant

*Covenant is the deep and persuasive affirmation that our lives in all aspects depend on our relatedness to this other one, who retains the initiative in our lives (sovereignty) and wills more good for us than we do for ourselves.*¹⁶

Covenant is not for Brueggemann some strict methodology into which the whole of the Bible is squeezed. Neither is it understood in whole as a specific treaty, but as a metaphor for the relationship that God enters into with people¹⁷. For Brueggemann the voices of the Old

13 Miller in: Brueggemann: *Old Testament Theology* p.xvii

14 Brueggemann: *Theology of the Old Testament* p.74

15 Brueggemann: *Theology of the Old Testament* p.74-75

16 Brueggemann: *Psalms and the Life of Faith* p.151

17 Brueggemann: *Psalms and the Life of Faith* p.150-1

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

Testament express a pattern in which Yahweh commits himself in covenant relationship, yet he modifies his actions as the situation develops¹⁸. This dialogue between the people and Yahweh is further intensified when as initiative taker, he offers a further dimension of hope and the relationship is re-modelled in the light of the change in social situation¹⁹. His covenantal theology is deeply challenging to the tradition of seeing God not just as initiator, but also as the strong partner in covenant. According to Brueggemann the canonical witness reveals covenantal relationship in Yahweh taking risks by committing himself to humankind²⁰.

Rhetoric

Brueggemann makes excellent use of rhetoric which is evident in two ways, his exegesis and his delivery. The elucidation of the text or concept at hand is without doubt enhanced by the way in which the contrasting ideas are clearly illuminated. Rhetoric is identified by Brueggemann in the monumental "Theology of the Old Testament". The people's understanding of Yahweh, their "core testimony", is pitted against the "counter testimony" of the community in the scene of a courtroom drama. Rhetoric and ambiguity are both pinpointed in the canonical witness and used by Brueggemann in the presentation of his thesis. In this way he clarifies biblical rhetoric.

The nature of his delivery engages the reader with his thesis being explicated in the elaborate use of language. The outcome of the emphasis on covenantal risk leaves space for ambiguous conclusions. The reader gets caught up in the rhetoric of the enunciation of his thesis and the passion of the argument. However, when the reader returns to examine the thesis in detail, it becomes apparent that it is simpler in reality than the rhetoric makes it appear²¹. This rhetoric, although engaging, could leave the reader in a state of confusion wondering exactly what his conclusions were.

Social Power

*Walter Brueggemann has brought his theological pursuits together with a long standing interest in social analysis in his interpretation of biblical texts.*²²

Brueggemann's interest is in allowing the Old Testament to become relevant to contemporary faith communities. A background in sociology has enabled him to apply the fruits of his exegesis to contemporary situations with sophistication. The exercise of social power is

18 Which has four expressions: Israel, Human Individuals, Nations, and Creation. Brueggemann: Theology of the Old Testament p.555

19 Brueggemann: A Social Reading of the Old Testament p. 45-58

20 Brueggemann: A Social Reading of the Old Testament p.46

21 This observation of Brueggemann's use of rhetoric has originated in the comments of Dr. Ingram

22 Millar in Brueggemann: A Social Reading of the Old Testament p.1

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

observed in Brueggemann in the way in which the text is used within the social context to influence the action or attitude of the community. In "Abiding Astonishment" he observes the functions of the historical Psalms is to form a world view for the community²³. He interprets the Psalms in the light of his view that the exile influenced the final form of the text. The theme of social power is illustrated through examining the Psalms' social context and the application of social theory, leading to the conclusion that history is a vehicle for social power²⁴.

Summary

In the approach and different emphases within Brueggemann, we see the communities of faith responding to the voice of Yahweh, however that may come. This helpful approach to the sociological response of communities within scripture, and within contemporary situations, could challenge the core understanding of the evangelical communities within which I stand. If the main responsibility lies with the community to interpret God's voice in the light of their social situation, the word of God may be applied in any fashion or mode the community deems appropriate. Many communities' (including Baptists) have held dear to the canonical witness as the revealed word of God. While every effort should be made to apply those words to the current social situation, it would be a denial of the authority of scripture if the situation were to dictate the message of the text.

²³ Brueggemann: [Abiding Astonishment](#) p.21

²⁴ Brueggemann: [Abiding Astonishment](#) p.28

Post-Exilic community

Brueggemann's core themes of exile, covenant, rhetoric and social power can be seen in his study of post-exilic community. The study of post-exilic community could be problematic, essentially because the end of the period is indeterminable. In a sense the current age remains post-exilic. Brueggemann's underlying canonical assumption gives an appropriate framework for this study, namely the period which stands within the Hebrew Bible. It was during this period that the community of Israel was redefined and the Jewish identity was born. The former nation of Israel that was dispossessed by the Babylonians, became under the Persians, the district known as Yehud²⁵.

Exile

Just as the period of exile heavily influences Brueggemann's theology it exercises a similar domination on the thinking and theology of the community returning to their homeland. The prophetic voice had recreated the Israelite religion in a way that could be understood without monarchy, land or temple. Brueggemann suggests that were now "politically irrelevant"²⁶ and that there are three distinctive elements to the post-exilic community making a recovery. Their main task was to work at recovering their collective story, their sense of connection with one another and with their ancestral roots. Secondly the community practised "intense hope"²⁷ as it was gathered and reformed. The concrete nature of the promises offered by prophets in and out of exile offered the community "a hope and a future"²⁸. They were becoming an "intensely textual community"²⁹ with the resurgence of the law, the 'discovery' of the book of Chronicles and the gathering of the community to hear the law read aloud. Although these characteristics of the community took root as they gained a degree of autonomy from the Persians, they were planted and germinated in exile under the Babylonians. The "prophetic imagination" had reformed, envisioned and renewed the community.

Covenant

Brueggemann's theology of covenant is powerfully illustrated in the return from exile. Yahweh has risked partnership with the community in the liberation and return from exile. The community has been reformed and the way in which Yahweh speaks to them changes. In exile the voice of the prophet was the vehicle of Yahwistic communication. The return to the home

25 Sterne p. 138

26 Brueggemann: *A Social Reading of the Old Testament* p.270

27 Brueggemann: *A Social Reading of the Old Testament* p. 270

28 Jeremiah 29:11

29 Brueggemann: *A Social Reading of the Old Testament* p. 271

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

land signalled a change and the law became the main way for the voice of Yahweh to be heard in the community. This is due in no small measure to Ezra's own enthusiasm for the law (cf. Ezra 7:6ff) and its outworking in the new situation. The law became a central part of the community's experience, and the use of the more conservative and idyllic book of Chronicles is a reflection of their needs at that time³⁰ as perceived by the conservative voice. The Ezra-Nehemiah community is reflected in church communities formed centuries later and identified by Dulles as "church as herald", by which he means a community that is gathered and formed around what is perceived by the community as the words of God³¹. We see in the conclusion of the book of Ezra the community gathered in response to the realisation that the text they referred to as the voice of Yahweh needed some response. In that gathering we see the community suggesting to the leader a solution to their predicament³². The increasing dependence upon text influenced the perception of the covenantal relationship with Yahweh. The text became pitted against the word of the prophet, stirring within the community a debate about the interpretation of the law. The Ezra-Nehemiah camp had rigid obedience to the law as the central element in their theology, yet the prophets had a vision of grace at the heart of their understanding. As Yahweh had been gracious enough to take them out of captivity, then He would be gracious enough to take the foreigner who "joins themselves to the Lord" to "His Holy mountain" (Isaiah 56:6-7). These two views present an "internal debate about the nature of post-exilic community"³³ and leave the reader with a tension to resolve.

Rhetoric

The vision of return from exile had been propagated under the visionary prophets, Second Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Habakkuk. The rhetoric of vision that was painted by these exilic quixotics was a vivid contrast to the hard work that return to the ruined homeland would involve. The community responded to the rhetoric of vision but found that it covered the reality³⁴. The internal and external conflicts which led to the initial rebuilding of the temple being forestalled by discouragement³⁵ were in some measure a result of the rhetoric. Although the returned exiles may have discerned Yahweh's hand in bringing them out of exile, He was certainly leaving them with a distinct amount of work to do. This is not a criticism of the prophetic voice, merely an observation. It would be unlikely that a visionary would have much

30 Birch p. 428

31 Dulles p.76 ff

32 Ezra 10:2

33 This line of thought is not original to me, it was first raised in conversation with Rev. G. Cooper

34 This is not dissimilar to the reader of Brueggemann discovering a simple thesis in the midst of rhetorical haze.

35 It would seem that the rebuilding of the temple was subject to fits and starts: cf. Ezra 4:4, 23

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

success in imparting the vision if the first statement was: "It's going to be hard work".

The reconstruction of the capital was undertaken by the exiled community. Those who managed to hide and stay or had been purposefully left were apparently not considered by the exiles as worthy of involvement in the rebuilding³⁶. The canon reflects the interests of the exiled community, not the community that had never been exiled. This polarization of power may well have been due to the exiled community being the educated elite³⁷. The exclusive nature of the community returning to rebuild is one side of the discussion that is evident regarding the nature of the post-exilic community in the Persian period.

Social Power

The reformed community was no longer under its own national government and as such the shape of Yahwistic practice had to be redefined to fit the new situation. The rededication of the temple in 515 BCE was a landmark moment in the new community, enabling the worship of Yahweh to recommence in a style reminiscent of the monarchic kingdom. The Roman destruction of the temple in AD 70 ended the second temple period. The second temple did not have the royal connections that its predecessor had. Solomon's temple had been connected directly to the palace, as a visible expression of the connexion between the government of the nation and the worship of Yahweh. Brueggemann shows how during the exile the community reformed and reevaluated such patterns of thinking through repentance, grief and hope³⁸. In order for the dismembered community to continue to remain Yahwistic they had to conclude that Yahweh could be worshipped outside of the temple³⁹. The prophets had shown them that although the tangible link between Yahweh and nation was no longer there, Yahweh was still in control of the nations, kings and rulers of the nations. This control had now been demonstrated by using the pagan king to liberate them from their exile and enabling them to rebuild the temple.

Because of the changed nature of government the leadership in the community could not be the same. Leadership shown in the narrative accounts of the return from exile was located in Nehemiah, the king's appointed emissary to the region, and in Ezra the priest. These

36 Ezra 3:8

37 cf. 2 Kings 24:14; Daniel 1:1 ff.

38 Brueggemann *Theology of the Old Testament* p.435-439

39 Examples of this theological realignment can be seen in Psalm 137 where Yahwistic worship/lament is evident in captivity and in Isaiah 40 where the prophetic utterance encourages a stance of Yahwistic control opposed to

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

characters⁴⁰ demonstrated two leadership styles. Nehemiah being pragmatic, found his leadership centred on a task. This started with desire; desire turned to commission, which developed into action. Ezra's leadership saw the Law central in his understanding leading him to make clear application of the law to the revived community. The difficulties of these two styles are not immediately apparent, however the tensions that they present can lead to certain difficulties in interpretation.

The way in which the law is read and interpreted by the compilers of the Ezra and Nehemiah material presents interrelationships as a big issue for the returning community. The clear boundaries of who is and who is not part of the re-formed community provides a sense of security and perhaps the rigid application of the law, barbaric as it may seem, is to some degree a security engendering measure⁴¹. The other half of the discussion which supplies the tension is provided by the prophets who seem to be calling for an open ended view of community. Post-exilic Isaiah creates an image of Torah obedience which in essence agrees with the Ezra-Nehemiah stance⁴². However the application of such obedience is observed by Brueggemann as moving "in a very different, inclusive direction"⁴³. The inclusive stance of Isaiah is an apparent relaxation or denunciation of the exclusion of "illicit" marriage that is found in Deuteronomy 23. Such tension within the post-exilic community indicates that, while there is a strong emphasis on obedience and covenant keeping within the renewed community, there is not a clear consensus regarding the application of the law. A plurivocal discussion is clear here. Texts such as Joel, Ruth and Jonah stand in contrast to the Ezra-Nehemiah vision⁴⁴. It is in the midst of this debate we see social power being outworked. The onlooker is inclined to wonder who will win this pit of wills, those who seek a new era of inclusivity and acceptance with Lord as the centrepiece of the community, or those who seek an ethnically pure environment with adherence to the conservative text as the centrepiece of the community's dynamics.

Summary

While the rhetoric of the prophets refocused, re-imagined and reconstructed the community, bringing it to this stage in its development, the community needs a more concrete way of

Yahwistic abandonment.

40 The exact dates of these two characters is not clear, see Widengren p. 503 ff. for a thorough assessment

41 For further discussion on this, particularly Ezra's expulsion of foreign wives see: Williamson p.145-162; Clines p.128-131

42 Isaiah 56:1-2

43 Brueggemann *Isaiah 40-66* p.170

44 For further discussion see: Hanson pp.233-325

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

relating the voice of Yahweh. They have unravelled the rhetoric of vision and discovered that at the heart of the vision the same concepts are enunciated again and again. They have learned that although Yahweh takes a risk on the community, at the heart of the renewal is hard work. The canonisation of scripture in this period reflects the needs of the community to rely on the text rather than monarchical decree or prophetic utterance. The community is reformed, but reformed around a text not a temple. The text is used by the different voices in the community to exercise social power and the community finds application of old truth in a new context.

Roots of Baptist Community

Introduction

As we have seen in the post-exilic community, the nature of communities is that they change and develop as their context and situation develops. This is certainly true of Baptists. Whilst you can see the original founding principles still alive and well within Baptist communities, it is possible to observe the way in which those communities have developed and changed. We shall identify how Brueggemann's themes of Exile, Rhetoric, Covenant and Social Power are expressed in seventeenth to nineteenth century Baptist communities. In the next chapter we shall explore the development of those founding principles in the contemporary union of Baptist churches known as the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

Exile

It would be presumptuous to suggest that the early Baptist communities' simplistic and unwavering dependence upon scripture would have led them to interpret their situation in the light of canonized exilic and post-exilic community. Our distance from their situation and our knowledge of Brueggemann's ability to bring together both scripture and social situation give us the opportunity to look at the dynamic of early Baptist community and observe some parallels between it and the exiles. The practice of what Brueggemann has identified as "recovery"⁴⁵ was paramount. The early communities had separated themselves from the state church, consequently they had to discover or rediscover their identity. They did so by identifying their practice as a recovery of scriptural tradition rather than church tradition⁴⁶. This led to their becoming "intensely textual"⁴⁷ as their need for identity was further confirmed through the centrality of the scriptures in their meetings⁴⁸. The relationship with the "world" is explicitly defined in the early Baptist communities' covenants. The communities experienced a sense that they were separated from the world (indeed in 1640 Broadmead Baptist church committed itself to being separate from the "worship of the world"⁴⁹). We have observed that this separation from the world was to some extent a product of the social environment shaping the theology. Separation from the world was not only a theological framework but a social necessity. The behaviour of Baptists marked them out as different from the "world", because they were by their very nature separate from the "world" (the state and the church).

45 Brueggemann: *A Social Reading of the Old Testament* p. 270

46 Wheeler Robinson p. 12

47 Brueggemann: *A Social Reading of the Old Testament* p. 271

48 Early Baptist confessions and covenants are dependent on scriptural quotes or allusions to scripture.

49 George p.173

Rhetoric

The exclusive nature of the community was built in the climate of impassioned theological debate. The Baptist communities were convinced by a mixture of congregationalism and ideals about the nature of baptism. This rhetoric envisioned and empowered them to exercise their understanding of the Bible in their exclusive relational groups. Whereas Brueggemann has his books, and the exile had the prophetic imagination, the early Baptist communities needed to find a way of expressing their understanding. They needed a device by which the vision could be expressed in a way that both they, and those outside the community could clearly see the rhetoric. Baptists chose to express themselves through covenant and confession. Each Baptist expression of the church formed a covenantal agreement between themselves expressing both their theological ideals and their commitment to one another. Although individuals published confessions, as the Baptists developed their sense of interconnection the confessions became a consensus of opinion which gave their rhetoric greater force⁵⁰.

Covenant

The early Baptist communities took their congregational reading of how scripture applied to the formation of churches in relation to practice and government, and formulated these covenants. Each covenant expressed in some measure the theological stance of the community but was also the device by which the members could measure their conduct both within and without the community. The climate of oppression and persecution that surrounded these communities engendered an atmosphere that encouraged the need for close commitment between those who professed the same beliefs. Each person who entered into the covenant was entering an agreement with people upon whom, should persecution come, they could rely⁵¹. The understanding of covenant found in Brueggemann is reflected in the nature of these covenants. In entering into covenant the members of the community took a risk in trusting each other. Although the early covenants record a variety of practice, they all reflect this risk. They show the nature of how the community understood their relationship and responsibility to one another, and likewise with the "world and times they lived in"⁵².

Although each community expressed itself in covenant, some were more explicit than others. The later (18th century) covenants were more detailed than their predecessors, explicating the

50 The most famous of which is the London Confession of 1644. George p.34-52

51 This is reflected in accounts of some of the persecuted Baptists. One such example can be found in the account of 18th century Baptist, John Taylor. Todd p.17

52 Covenant of Broadmead Baptist Church, Bristol, England (1640). George p. 173

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

responsibilities in detail⁵³. In all cases, whether they be wordy or brief, the signatories of the covenants committed themselves to one another. The early covenants reflect an already close relationship among the community. The covenants of Broadmead Baptist Church and of Leominster Baptist Church make specific reference to all the individuals in the covenant or to the leaders of the church. The later covenants are instructive in nature, laying down the principle of "watching over each other", to "pray for one another", to "bear with one another", to "strive together" and to "meet together"⁵⁴.

This practice of covenanting was part of the process identified by Brueggemann as recovery⁵⁵. Each community was recovering a measure of connectivity. The social context supplied the lack of connectivity and the covenants provided a tangible expression of that need and its outworking.

Social Power

The social backdrop to the formation of the early Baptist communities sheds light on the interpretation that the early Baptist communities used. It is undisputed that Baptist practice originated at the time of the Reformation. There is some discussion however, as to the extent that the English Baptists relied upon the influence of the Anabaptists from the Continent⁵⁶. As we see Brueggemann and post-exilic community being influenced by the prevailing social culture, we see it affecting Baptists. The early communities were formed out of separatism because of their approach to baptism, not because of their approach to community⁵⁷. At a time of increasing theological diversity, the lack of theological toleration within society aided their formation as communities and consequently influenced their theology⁵⁸. If communities of faith had accepted a broader range of baptismal practice, there would have been no need for those who were convicted by the need for a "believers' baptism" to form their own communities. Characteristically the early Baptist communities referred their practice to scripture, and the early confessions are full of scriptural quotes or allusions to scripture. Baptists historians have

53 The covenant of the Baptist church in Leominster dated 25.7.1656 contains just over 70 words whereas the much later covenant of the Baptist Church in Horse Fair in 1790 contains over 1300 words. See George p.175,

54 This example taken from the covenant of Benjamin and Elias Keech, 1967 George p. 178

55 Brueggemann: *A Social Reading of the Old Testament* p.270

56 Hayden p. 20-21; Walton p.63; George p.6 place the development of English Baptists firmly within England ; Payne *The Fellowship of Believers* p.21 and Underwood p.29-62 see the development of two streams of Baptists much more clearly, with one being significantly influenced by the European Anabaptists and the other emerging a little later influenced by English Separatist Calvinism.

57 Payne: *The Fellowship of Believers* p. 21

58 The introduction to the London confession of 1644 refers to the persecution of "those churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists." George p.34-36

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

followed in this vein in defence of their tradition. The literature within the Baptist tradition has an approach which mirrors that of the Ezra-Nehemiah tradition. Whereas the post-exilic conservatives assume that scripture informed the practice of expulsion, the Baptist historians assume that scripture informed the practice of the early Baptist communities. There is no hint that either group recognise that the social environment could have informed and influenced the reading and interpretation of scripture.

Social power is developed within the Union. As the individuals expressed their commitment to each other through covenant, the churches began to associate with each other. The Union was formed from the ground up, the churches maintained individuality and theologically distinctive views, but related to each other because of common causes. As current practice is developed a significant change is discernible within the Union. We shall see the same principles that have been visible in the post-exilic community and in the early Baptist communities as the social situation develops. The outworking of those principles however, takes a significant shift.

Contemporary Baptist Community

Introduction

Contemporary Baptist communities still have at their heart an understanding of community that marks them out as different both within and without the wider church. The central principles of community have changed little in Baptist circles from the seventeenth century, when the community was spoken about as "being knit unto the Lord and unto another"⁵⁹, to the present day. The contemporary Baptist theologian Beasley-Murray applies the same principle thus: "Wherever a group of Christians meet and promise together to live and work as Christian people there is the Church"⁶⁰. While the core principles of community remain the same for most Baptist communities today, there are a number of expressions of the "Church" that consider themselves "Baptist". While united on these core principles, these different groups, unions and independent churches often have distinct approaches to other areas of theology. For the purposes of this discussion we shall concentrate on the largest of these groups in the UK, the Baptist Union of Great Britain. Within these churches the principles of exile, covenant, rhetoric and social power are still clearly visible, although their dynamic has changed with the nature of the community.

Exile

Baptist churches enjoyed a period of great prosperity during the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. During this period many churches had a significant impact on the communities around them, becoming central to their welfare and existence⁶¹. They were active both in proclamation of the gospel message and in social action. The shift from the edges of social life in the UK to the centre initiated a move from a simple understanding of community into monolithic denominational structures. Yet another shift in the life of the Baptist churches has taken them from the heart of community life to the fringes of community life again. The change in social culture and the overall decline of the church in the UK has meant that, instead of being vibrant organizations in the heart of the community, many Baptist churches have become special interest groups on the edges of society. Though difficult to document, there is a sense of exile in many Baptist churches. There has been a rash of church histories in recent years as churches have tried to make sense of their past in the light of their present. The collective memory in these communities will draw on times when the building was full on Sundays, when the buildings were in good repair and when offerings were high. Sensing this

59 Confession of Thomas Helwys (Payne p.22)

60 Haymes *Why be Baptist?* p.2

61 Spurgeon is a representative example. He established alms houses and an orphanage.

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

exilic-depression in the membership figures and offerings, the Baptist Union recently underwent a consultation among its member churches and concluded that the core of Baptist practice needed to be evaluated and if necessary, redefined. The process of "recovery" in Brueggemann had to begin again.

Rhetoric

This review of their values concluded that at the centre of every facet of what it means to be "Baptist" is a dimension of community⁶². Within these values there is emphasis on the community being inclusive. This is a significant development within Baptist theology. The early communities were formed in a very exclusive way, whereby you were either in or out. To talk of the community "transcending barriers" and "identifying⁶³" with people who are outside of the community's boundaries challenges the exclusiveness of the past. There is a sense of irony, in that the development of the current position stands in tension with the positions of the early communities, yet both strive towards recovery. With decline as the social backdrop to many Baptist communities, it would be easily perceived that the consultation and review should emphasise inclusion as at the heart of Baptist understanding. The very survival of these communities depends upon their ongoing development and growth, so exclusiveness was no longer an option. In order to communicate the change in circumstances and theology, the Union launched a document called "Five Core Values for a Gospel People" with much fanfare. Accompanying the glossy document was an impressively produced video and a set of bible studies, all re-enforcing the new vision of Baptist communities being dynamic groups effective in each of the newly identified values⁶⁴. This rhetorical device is currently being employed within the Union. Churches are encouraged to do the bible studies in their house groups and regional associations take the values as themes for their quarterly gatherings⁶⁵. The rhetoric is re-enforced by the introduction of an annual covenant service which re-enforces the "Five Core Values"⁶⁶. Just as rhetoric is used dynamically by Brueggemann, the exilic prophetic voice and in the covenants and confessions of the early Baptists, the Union now deploys it to re-enable and re-envision their member congregations.

62 See BUGB report: Five core Values for a Gospel people

63 5 Core Values p.6-7

64 A Prophetic Community, An Inclusive Community, A sacrificial Community, A Missionary Community and A Worshiping Community.

65 The East Midland Baptists have adopted one of the "five core values" as the overarching theme for each of their quarterly meeting (2002/3)

66 Covenant 21 p.11

Covenant

Covenant is being re-introduced to Baptist theology and practice within the rhetorical fanfare. The denominational consultation has been heralded as the gateway to a new era, a shift in "priority to the spiritual relationship over the institutional organisation."⁶⁷ Reliance on the Bible as the central text is obvious, as the covenant material is littered with scriptural quotes or allusions to scripture. The desire of the Union is expressed in terms that leave the reader in no doubt that they are aiming at recovery. They express that recovery in terms of commitment: "We hope that you will use the Covenant ... as a sign of our commitment to God and to each other."⁶⁸ In terms of unity: "This covenant text offers an opportunity for your congregation to say something together ... with other Baptists in other places."⁶⁹ Also in terms of re-enforcing the rhetoric: "We commit ourselves to the kingdom vision of the "Five Core Values for a Gospel people".⁷⁰ The Union is aiming to re-enforce not only of the "Five Core Values" but also the connectivity of the diverse Baptist churches. While the covenant reflects an emphasis on interdependence within the local and the wider community⁷¹, it reflects the traditional view of covenant between God and man. At no point in the liturgy or in the service is there Brueggemann's suggestion that God risks anything by entering into partnership with us. The concern of the liturgy is expressed entirely in terms of God's initiative and in terms of recovery of the historical roots of Baptist identity⁷². The sense of risk experienced in the return from exile and in the early Baptist communities is not self evident.

Social Power

Having identified a significant shift in the outworking of the principles which govern Baptist communities, it would be remiss not to examine some of the current social trends and to ask if such trends influenced the development in the theology. The situation faced by the Baptist churches in the UK is one that has developed well beyond that of the early Baptist communities. Initially the individual communities formed into groups of churches that associate with one another, and those groups formed denominations which have formed and reformed into the two expression of what it means to be Baptist in contemporary society⁷³. The once simple

67 David Coffey Covenant 21 p.0

68 Covenant 21 p.3

69 Covenant 21 p.3

70 Covenant 21 p.3

71 " We come called to share in God's mission We come to express the fullness of his body in relationships between the churches" Covenant 21 p.8

72 Historical echoes of "Walk Together" and "Watch over each other" are reflected at in the covenant liturgy Covenant 21 p.12

73 This change is observed and charted in the progression of the New Connexion of General Baptists that is now part of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. Rinaldi in The Tribe of Dan

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

understanding of community that lay at the heart of the early Baptist churches has been transformed into denominational structures. These structures have found themselves unable to adapt to the changing needs of society and the member churches. The research published by "Christian Research" in 1998 showed that most of the traditional denominations have been in rapid decline. The only two traditional denominations to show any minuscule signs of growth were the Baptists and the Orthodox⁷⁴. The overall climate of decline has given each denomination the opportunity to look at their emphasis and examine why their group is declining. Although there are some signs of gain, the Baptist Union of Great Britain had suffered a period of decline (both in numbers and in financial viability). This decline placed the existence of the Union and its churches at risk⁷⁵. The threat of decay and death forced the aforementioned consultation within the Union and the review of its emphases⁷⁶. The rhetoric of vision in the "Five Core Values for a Gospel People" is also a vehicle of social power. The formation of Baptist groups and associations were "ground up" structures. Churches associated under common beliefs and ideals, while allowing for individual churches to interpret scripture as they saw fit. The vision of the "Five Core Values" is an explicit attempt by the denominational structure to influence the theology of the Baptist communities that form the Union. The implication of this shift in social power will be seen fully as Baptist Community is seen in the light of this study.

74 The number of churches in these two groups have increased, the number of members, however has declined. Brierly p.2.10-11

75 Financial decline is still a current issue with a projected shortfall of 10% by year end 2002 (Baptist Times 12 October 2002)

76 The necessity of this consultation is documented by David Coffey in "On the road to reform"

Baptist Community in the light of Studies in Method, Post-exilic community, Historic and Current Theology and Practice

My studies have lead me to question some aspects of the way theology is being developed within the Union. At this juncture I shall reflect on the dialogue between Brueggemann, Post-exilic community and Baptist churches today and record some questions that have been raised by this study, but are not covered by its remit.

Exile

The use of exile found in Brueggemann is helpful as a metaphor for understanding the post-exilic era, the formation of the exclusive Baptist communities and the move of the contemporary communities from exclusivity to inclusivity. We have seen that the social effects of exile have in some measure forced each social group to examine its understanding of how God's voice is to be interpreted in the new social context. As the union seeks to move its structure and associated congregations out of social exile, questions about the implications of return loom. Should the community succeed in its bid to return from the margins of community life to the centre, how will the nature of the community need to redevelop? What examples of successful and long term return from exile exist within the canon and within Baptist practice? One may even suggest that exile and return are part of the natural life cycle of communities of faith. The canon reflects two major occurrences of exile in the Egyptian and Babylonian eras. The emphasis within Brueggemann on the recovery of communities as they return is seen in the major redefinition of the way they receive God's voice and practice their faith. With this in mind, should the contemporary Baptist communities be proactive in maintaining their community profile, or proactive in preparing for the next exile?

Covenant

Having observed the risk reflected in covenant as communities return from exile, Brueggemann's challenge to see God as initiator, but also as risk taker needs to be reflected within the Baptist sphere. Maintaining that God is initiator without acknowledging the risk that he takes, misses a helpful dimension to the Christian life and practice. It is a bizarre truth that God, although being acknowledged by the various communities of faith as outside their realm of control (cf. Isaiah 40), stakes his reputation on the community, choosing to work only through it. His investment in the covenant partnership is in risking his reputation on relationship with humanity. Although the contemporary covenant service reflects the divine purpose outworked

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

in the body, reflecting this risk may bring a dimension to the community's faith and practice that does not exist (or is certainly not evident). If God is seen in some measure as risk taker, humanity can be both encouraged and affirmed. A different understanding of the responsibility and nature of relationship that covenant with him brings may be unearthed enabling a positive view of God's investment of trust in the community.

Rhetoric

The employment of rhetoric and rhetorical devices within communities working at recovery has been seen in Brueggemann as a key feature of post-exilic communities. The importance of visionary rhetoric is illustrated by the Baptist Union in the use of two devices which are employed and re-enforced in different and diverse ways. Beneath the rhetoric is a simple premise (as is evident in other rhetorical devices). That premise is that if the Union does not change, it is threatened with death. That premise is implicitly stated, and it would appear that a subversive attempt to prepare the communities for change in religious practice is being employed. "We come as a people on a journey with God, open to change: ready to discover new ways of being church at this time."⁷⁷ The significance of this small sentence may not be clearly apparent to the main body of the communities which are expected to commit to it. No attempt is made in the liturgy to explain it, although a non explicit reference is made to it in the accompanying notes under the theme of change⁷⁸. Whether the attempt to prepare the communities for change is being used knowingly is not clear. As a practising Baptist Minister, I would suggest that the majority of the congregations I have visited recently are neither prepared or equipped to discover "new ways of being church." I suspect, however, that the majority of Baptist Ministers are at least aware that some form of change in religious practice is indeed appropriate. The rhetoric is reflective of Brueggemann's practice, it is vibrant, engaging, biblical and it moves the current understanding on without the full implications being apparent. While rhetoric can be used positively by envisioning and enabling communities, its use to subvert theology and practise is ethically questionable.

Social Power

Brueggemann's observation of the way the text is used to gain social power has been seen in the development of post-exilic community and in Baptist community. The Union's attempt to influence the member communities in a manner that moves them from the fringes of the wider community back towards the centre will influence individual Baptist communities' social

⁷⁷ Covenant 21 p.8

⁷⁸ A two paragraph reference to change is made. Covenant 21 p.15

Brueggemann and Communities of Faith:
A study in the dynamics of community as seen post-exile and in Baptist communities.

standing. By taking seriously the visionary rhetoric of the Union and applying the principles of community outlined therein, each community does stand to gain fresh impetus and vision. This can be no bad thing for communities whether they feel central to, or on the edge of their social situation as they gain fresh social power. The danger of losing individual theological identity should not be overlooked as the Union attempts to gain social power over its associated churches. While it would not be wise to reject out of hand intervention in a top down manner from the upper echelons of the Union's committees, individual Baptist communities would be well advised to engage in careful reflection upon the underlying implications of, and approaches to, the theology that is being propagated.

Summary

Brueggemann's influence in the study of exile, covenant, rhetoric and social power, in both the canonical witness and within Baptist life and practice, helpfully enlightens the path to recovery of identity, and the renewal of the communities that make up the Union. We have observed within the Union a significant change of emphasis. I am concerned that the positive steps that have been taken within the Union to rouse the community from its sense of exile have changed the Union's theological dynamic. Where the individual churches once shaped the theology of the Union, the Union is now shaping the theology of the churches. I suspect that because of the use of prophetic rhetoric and dressing up the changes with contemporary marketing techniques, this significant change will go unnoticed in many churches. While many may agree with the changes and the way they are being implemented under the current direction of General Secretary, David Coffey, I am concerned that such a significant change may be used in the future in a manner that is not so widely applauded.

ACKROYD, P.	1984	The Jewish Community in the Persian Period. In DVIES, D. ; FINKELSTEIN, L. The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume 1 Introduction: The Persian Period.	Cambridge: C. U. P.
BEAL, T.; LINA FELT, T.	1998	God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann.	Minneapolis: Augsburg
BEASLEY-MURRAY, P.	1992	Radical Believers	Didcot: B. U.
BERQUIST, J. L.	1995	Judaism in Persia's Shadow.	Minneapolis: Fortress press
BIRCH, B. C.; BRUEGGEMANN, W.; FRET HEIM, T. E.; PETERSEN, D. L.	1999	A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament	Nashville: Abingdon Press
BRIERLEY, P.	1997	Religious Trends: Volume 1	London: Christian Research
BRIGGS, J. H. Y.	1994	The English Baptists of the 19 th Century	Didcot: Baptist Historical Society
BRIGHT, J.	1972	A History of Israel, Second Edition	Philadelphia: Westminster
BROWN, R.	1986	The English Baptists of the 18 th Century	Didcot: Baptist Historical Society
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	1991	Abiding Astonishment: Psalms, Modernity, and the Making of History	Louisville: W. J. K.
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	1994	A Social Reading of the Old Testament	Minneapolis: Fortress press
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	1993	Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts Under Negotiation	London: S. C. M.
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	1997	Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles	Louisville: W. J. K.
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	2000	Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World	Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	1982	Genesis	Atlanta: John Knox Press
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	1992	Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile	London: S. C. M.
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	1998	Isaiah 1-39	Louisville: W. J. K.
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	1998	Isaiah 40-66	Louisville: W. J. K.
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	1992	Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme and Text.	Minneapolis: Fortress press
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	1984	The Message of the Psalms	Minneapolis: Augsburg
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	1997	Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy	Minneapolis: Fortress press
BRUEGGEMANN, W.	1995	The Psalms: The Life of Faith	Minneapolis: Fortress press
CLINES, D. J.	1984	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (New Century Bible)	Sheffield: S. A. P.
COFFEY, D.	2000	On the Road to Reform: Articles on the Denominational Consultation Process	Didcot: B. U.
COOK, H.	1958	What Baptists Stand For	London: Carey Press
DALLIMORE, A.	1984	Spurgeon: A New Biography	Edinburgh: Banner of Truth
DULLES, A.	1987	Models of the Church: Expanded Edition	New York: Doubleday
ESKENENAZI, C. T.	1994	Second Temple Studies: 2. Temple and Community in the Persian Period.	Sheffield: S. A. P.
FIDDES, P. S.; HAYDEN, R.; KIDD, R. L.; CLEMENTS, K. W.; HAYMES, B.	1981	A Call to Mind: Baptist Essays Towards a Theology of Commitment	London: B. U.
FIDDES, P. S.; HAYDEN, R.; KIDD, R. L.; CLEMENTS, K. W.; HAYMES, B.	1985	Bound to Love: The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission	London: B. U.
GEORGE, D.; GEORGE, T.	1999	Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms	Nashville: Broadman & Holman
GILMORE, A.	1963	The Pattern of the Church	London: Lutterworth
HANSON, P. D.	2001	The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible. With a New Introduction	Louisville: W. J. K.

HARRISON, F. M. W.	1989	It All Began Here: The Story of the East Midlands Baptist Association	Didcot: Baptist Historical Society
HAYDEN, R.	1990	English Baptist History and Heritage	Didcot: B. U.
HAYMES, B.		Why Be a Baptist? The Baptist Basics Series	Didcot: B. U.
HOUSE, P. R.	1998	Old Testament Theology	Downers I. V. P. Grove:
JONES, G. H.	1993	1&2 Chronicles (Old Testament Guides)	Sheffield: S. A. P.
MEYERS, E. M.	1995	Second Temple Studies in the Light of Resent Archeology: Part 1: The Persian and Hellenistic Periods. In: HAUSER, A J. & SELLEW, A. Currents in research 2 (1995): Biblical Studies.	Sheffield: S. A. P.
MEYERS, E. M.; LYND-PORTER, A.; AUBIN, M.; CHANCEY, M.	1995	Second Temple Studies in the Light of Resent Archeology: Part 2: The Roman Period, a bibliography. In: HAUSER, A J. & SELLEW, A. Currents in research 3 (1995): Biblical Studies.	Sheffield: S. A. P.
MOYTER, J. A.	1993	The Prophecy of Isaiah	Leicester: I. V. P.
PAYNE, E. A.	1958	The Baptist Union: A Short History	London: Carey Kingsgate
PAYNE, E. A.	1944	The fellowship of believers	London: Kingsgate Press
PLEINS, D. J.	2001	The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction	Louisville: Westminster John Knox
RINALDI, F. W.	1997	The Tribe of Dan: The New Connexion of General Baptists 1770- 1892 A Study in the Transition From Revival Movement to Established Denomination	PHD Thesis: University of Glasgow
STERN, E.	1981	The Province of Yehud: The Vision and the Reality. In LEVINE, L. I. The Jerusalem Cathedra: Studies in the History, Archeology, Geography and Ethnography of the Land of Israel.	Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi institute
TODD, J. R.	1997	By Foolishness of Preaching: Leicestershire and the 18th Century Evangelical Revival, with Particular Reference to the Lives and Works of the 'Barton Preachers'	Leicester: Barton-in-the-Beans Baptist Church
WALKER, M.	1992	Baptists at the Table	Didcot: Baptist Historical Society
WALTON, R.C.	1946	The Gathered Community	London: Carey Press
WHITE, B. R.	1983	The English Baptists of the 17 th Century	London: Baptist Historical Society
WIDENGREN, G.	1977	The Persian Period. In HAYES, J. H. & MILLER, J. M. Israelite and Judean History.	Philadelphia: Westminster Press
WILLIAMSON, H. G. M.	1987	Ezra and Nehemiah (Old Testament Guides)	Sheffield: S. A. P.
WILLIAMSON, H. G. M.	1985	Ezra and Nehemiah (Word Biblical Commentary)	Waco: Word Books
	2000	5 Core Values for a Gospel People	Didcot: B. U.
	2000	Covenant 21	Didcot: B. U.