

**English Baptist Denominational History as a Resource
for Theological Reflection on Church Health**

A Thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy in Practical Theology
in the Faculty of Humanities

Year of Submission: 2011

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Denominational History as a Resource for Theological Reflection on Church Health

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Abstract

The University of Manchester

Catriona Julie Mae Gorton

Master of Philosophy

Denominational History as a Resource for Theological Reflection on Church Health

Year of Submission: 2011

‘Knowledge of their past will inform the decisions [Baptists] take today which will shape their tomorrow.’ These words of Baptist historian Barrie White along with some from Archbishop Rowan Williams, that to ‘engage with the Church’s past is to see something of the Church’s future’ which ‘makes for the health of the church...’ lie at the heart of my thesis that denominational history has the potential to form a valuable and engaging resource for theological reflection within the field usually termed church health, and specifically in the consideration of change, actual or potential, in pastoral practice.

As a Practical Theologian, central to my approach is a belief that such reflection should be undertaken by and for the people who make up local congregations. My particular interest is in assisting local churches (congregations) to approach and manage change in ways that avoid the potential for destructive conflict: might it be that examples from denominational history form a valuable resource for reflection on processes that might be employed to approach contemporary issues? An initial survey of materials suggests that it might, but that in its current form it is largely inaccessible (literally and in relation to how it is presented). This submission presents a portfolio of work, based on the popular 'pastoral cycle' approach, exploring this possibility and establishing a way forward for developing a more accessible and engaging method to 'tell the story'.

After a thorough literature, which presents an overview of developments in the disciplines of church health and history alongside an outline of readily available Baptist history, my publishable article develops a renewed vision for the Baptist Historical Society, the voluntary body which produces the majority of UK Baptist historical writing, taking account of insights gained. Specifically, the potential for a more narrative/literary approach with a recovery of theological/spiritual language is identified as a way forward in increasing accessibility and usability of this rich resource in the way I advocate. Three possible approaches to developing resources are identified and explored in the research proposal, ranging from almost entirely empirical to totally theoretical, with justification of why each constitutes Practical Theology. Emphasis shifts away from the central thesis in the reflective paper which explores questions of 'readers' and 'writers' in relation to my own work as a researcher and a practical theologian. A final reflection, in lieu of a conclusion, draws threads together and affirms my conviction that denominational history has the potential to provide a rich and fruitful resource for theological reflection in the area of church health.

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Lay Abstract

Church congregations are regularly faced with the need to negotiate changes, whether in worship, in mission, in administration or in pastoral care. All too often change brings with it unhelpful, even destructive conflict. Can anything be done to address this, and if so what? Church Health is an area of Practical Theology concerned with the study of congregations and how they might be enabled to 'live' more healthy 'lives.' There is extensive work, and wide-ranging literature, on conflict resolution but very little that addresses a more fundamental issue: can congregations handle change, or its potential, more healthily, and, if so what resources are there to help them? This thesis explores the possibility that denominational history (in this case, English Baptist) might be such a resource, but notes that in its current form it is far from ideal for this purpose. Key to its usability are questions of accessibility – both literally being able to obtain material and in relation to its style, focus and form.

After a review of literature in the fields of Congregational Studies (the 'umbrella' of Church Health), of twentieth century developments in historiography and of publicly available English Baptist denominational history, consideration is given to how a method, or methods, might be developed to produce resources to assist local congregations in their endeavours to reflect theologically on questions of change. In addition to such materials being accessible to 'lay' people, the method would seek to restore a distinctive theological and/or spiritual tone to the writing of denominational history without losing the rigour of good historical method.

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Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Acknowledgements and Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the congregations at Hugglescote Baptist Church, Leicestershire, one of the oldest New Connexion General Baptist churches in England, and at Hillhead Baptist Church, Glasgow, the first church in the Baptist Union of Scotland to appoint an ordained woman minister in sole pastoral charge. It has been my privilege and pleasure to serve these churches whilst undertaking the research presented in this thesis, and each of them has an important, if largely unobserved, place in the denominational history of Baptists in Great Britain. I am grateful to them for what they have taught me about Baptist life and witness, their willingness to face the challenges of change and for their acceptance of my desire to pursue this project.

I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement from those who have acted as supervisors or advisers during this project:

Revd Dr Christopher Baker, William Temple Foundation
 Revd Dr Ruth Gouldbourne, minister Bloomsbury Baptist Church
 Professor Elaine Graham, formerly University of Manchester, now University of Chester
 Dr Ian Jones, formerly University of Manchester, now St Peter's Saltley Trust
 Dr Peter Scott, University of Manchester
 Revd Professor Sean Winter, formerly of Northern Baptist College, now United Faculty of Theology, Melbourne College of Divinity

Finally I record my gratitude to the following for their practical assistance during my research:

Baptist Union of Great Britain, Continuing Ministerial Education grant
 Northern Baptist College, library access and residential study grant
 Angus Library, Oxford, access to primary texts
 The Baptist Historical Society, information on membership

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Catriona Gorton holds first class honours degrees in Engineering, BSc (Eng), University of London 1985, and in Practical Theology, BA, University of Manchester 2002.

She is an ordained minister within the Baptist Union of Scotland and is accredited as a ministerial mentor with the Baptist Union of Scotland and the Baptist Union of Great Britain. She has served as Baptist minister for eight years, initially in England and currently in Scotland. In each context she has been directly involved in management of major change under challenging circumstances. Alongside pastoral responsibilities she has been involved in teaching and training, both within local congregations and at undergraduate level.

Research

Undergraduate research project "Single People's Experience of Church" 2002
An empirical exploration (using questionnaires and guided interviews) involving both church members/attenders and ministers in several congregations, mainly but not exclusively, Baptist.

MPhil Thesis (this submission) "Baptist Denominational History as a Resource for Theological Reflection on Church Health"

Publications

Contributions to the following books:

Hilary Taylor, *A Toolbox for Small Churches: A Spiritual and Practical Guide to Small Church Life*, 2007

Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Women, Baptists and Ordination*, 2005

J H Y Briggs (editor) *A Dictionary of European Baptist Life and Thought*, Paternoster, 2009

Conference Papers

C J M Gorton, *Doing Theology: History for the Health of the Church*, Baptists Doing Theology, Manchester 2008

C J M Gorton, *Renewing the Vision: History for the Health of the Church*, Baptist Historical Society, Prague, 2008 (to be published May 2011)

Journal Articles

C J M Gorton, *Because I am not a Hand: Single People's Experience of Church*, Baptist Minister's Journal, Summer 2003

C J M Gorton, *Augustine, Wesley and Me: Blogging as Theological Reflection*, Baptist Ministers' Journal, Spring 2009

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Setting the Scene

Christian Practical Theology is, at its best, accessible, creative and dynamic, drawing deeply from the riches of systematic theology and Christian tradition alongside insights from the humanities, social and natural sciences, arts and media to generate new insights into what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in specific circumstances, cultures or contexts; at its worst it degenerates into small scale social analysis shored up by weak connection to popular Bible stories. Because her/his work is often derided as 'not proper theology', there is a challenge to the practical theologian to ensure that it is academically rigorous without losing the essential 'ordinariness' that characterises its essence as a theology for, of and by 'the people of God.' It is this tension that shapes the work I present in this submission.

I have deliberately chosen a theoretical rather than empirical project, focussing on *method* or *process* rather than *content* per se. Rather than taking existing historical resource materials and carrying out small scale 'experiments' in their use, I have chosen to consider how suitable resources for such an experiment might be developed taking due account of contemporary academic research. At the same time, because accessibility is a key feature of practical theology in general, and my research in particular, I have sought to use accessible language and style.

The research programme within which this work was undertaken was defined as a 'portfolio' within which the candidate was invited to research and deliver a number of different papers, in diverse styles or genres, developing her/his critical and reflective skills as well undertaking original research. Such an approach is entirely in keeping with practical theology which is inherently playful and experimental. The four

deliverables – a literature review, a publishable article, a research proposal and a paper reflecting on practice – each demonstrate different skills and, significantly, are aimed at different audiences; I believe this must be acknowledged and employed creatively in this final submission. I argue that, whilst the four pieces stand alone, they represent a good example of a particular form of practical theology, popularised as the Pastoral Cycle, which formed the basis of my own undergraduate theology training and which I have refined and developed since. Each paper may be viewed as emerging from an iteration, or cycle, of this method, with each being in some measure the 'reflection' phase. In this opening chapter, I first outline the pastoral cycle method, as I use it before describing the professional contexts and experience out of which my research interest developed. Between subsequent chapters I include a brief outline of the pastoral cycle showing how the work that follows emerges from its use. The submission ends with final reflections, some personal, some academic, on the way in which this work is important and could be taken further.

The Pastoral Cycle¹

My training as a practical theologian had at its heart the Pastoral Cycle popularised by Laurie Green.² I have since encountered other methods and models for theological reflection³ and conclude that many, if not most, are essentially, a variation on the same theme. Whichever model is preferred, the key feature of

¹ This section originally formed part of the Literature Review and is extracted, with minor modifications, from the version of that document submitted during the programme.

² L. Green, *Let's Do Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1990).

³ See, for example, methods described in the following:

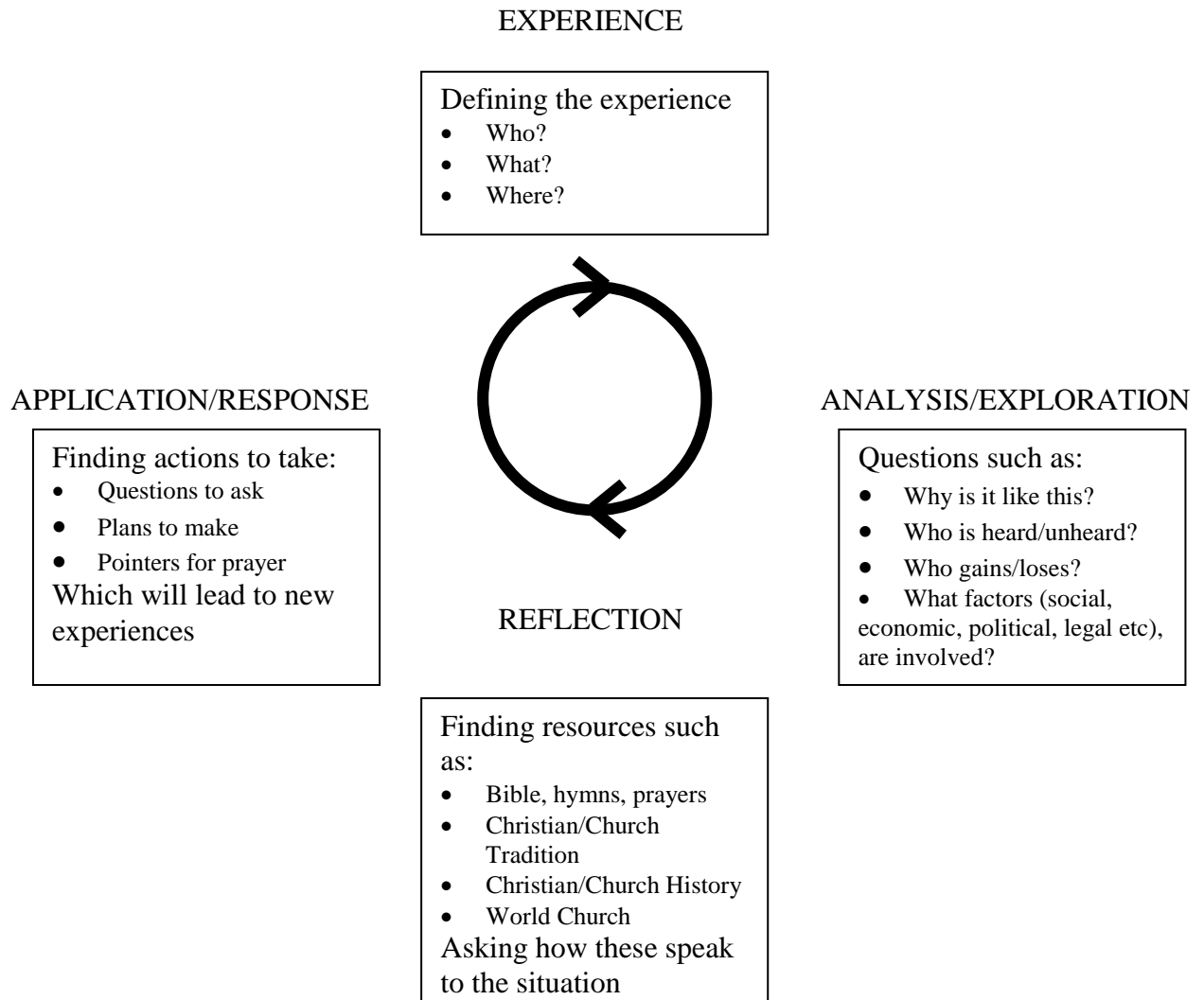
P. Ballard and J. Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*, Second ed. (London: SPCK, 2006), S. B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Revised and Expanded ed. (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), M. J. Cartledge, *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), E. Graham, H. Walton, and F. Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), P. O. C. Killen and J. d. Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), S. Pattison and J. W. Woodward, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

Practical Theology is that its (active) expression begins with (a discrete) experience, identifies questions or issues to explore, undertakes some form of reflection and then postulates possible outcomes for action. Expressed diagrammatically, Practical Theology may, in essence, be expressed thus:⁴



The danger of treating such a model simplistically is that it ignores the fact that the initial action (experience or practice) is shaped, if only subconsciously, by the reflection or influence of preceding processes – whether that is the received wisdom of creeds and traditions, ecclesiology or local culture. Similarly, there is a danger of assuming that it will produce a single ‘right’ outcome if it is used correctly. Far from a trivial method, great care is needed to ensure that ‘good theology’ emerges. Having used, and reflected upon, the Pastoral Cycle for many years, I believe it is a good model for theological reflection, but that caution is needed to avoid the pitfalls that are inherent within its accessibility. The diagram below represents my adaptation of the model. I recognise its partiality, and the need for ongoing refinement as I continually ‘reflect on reflection,’ e.g. during the exercise discussed in the Literature Review, I revised the ‘reflection’ resources to separate ‘history and tradition’ into two distinct categories, since, whilst linked, they are not identical.

⁴ This is essentially the same as Don Browning’s ‘practice to theory to practice’ D. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). p. 7



My experience of observing the Pastoral Cycle in use has been that the ‘reflection’ stage most often consists of finding a Bible story that superficially fits the experience – often aspects of the Exodus story, sometimes early parts of Genesis, otherwise New Testament motifs such as ‘resurrection,’ ‘Pentecost’ or the ‘New Jerusalem’.

These stories are often treated naively and uncritically, denying potential insights from Biblical Studies (or even a commentary), being a superficial ‘reader response.’

Without denying the legitimacy of reader response approaches, and even when Biblical material is used intelligently and creatively, I believe it is justified to question whether it should be the *only* resource employed to assist reflection. For example, my undergraduate training involved engagement with resources including

documents of the Early Church Fathers, contemporary experiences of Christians in Africa and Latin America and responses of western Christians to diverse social and political issues. As I continue to reflect on the process of reflection, I become increasingly convinced that there is a place for the inclusion of historical resources, specifically Christian historical resources, alongside the Bible, hymnody, liturgy, creeds, doctrinal statements and the 'world church' to aid reflection. Inevitably questions emerge around the use of historical material; such questions are central to my research and are explored in various ways in later chapters.

Whilst continued reflection on, and development of, the model is important, it provides a useful framework for my work and allows the various elements to be identified as part of an ongoing process of theological reflection. With this in mind, I describe the experience and contexts that inspired the reflections that motivated my research.

Starting from Experience

The story begins in 1998, around the time I was exploring a call to ordained ministry. The minister of the church of which I was a member resigned his post due to irreconcilable differences with some of the leaders. The issue was not handled well, relationships were damaged and no useful lesson learned: sadly, a similar breakdown and resignation occurred some years later. During my training, between 2001 and 2003, I worked with a church in conflict with its minister, a pattern it repeated roughly every decade, again seeming not to learn from the experience. As I began to look more widely, it was clear that conflict was rife in Baptist churches, and that there was clearly a need to explore how it might better be handled. Significant

efforts were being made, and continue to be made, by the Baptist Unions⁵ to help churches cope with conflict in a creative and constructive way, yet it seemed that little was being done to address the more fundamental issue of managing change, especially in pastoral practice, which seemed to lie at the root of much of the conflict I observed.

As I reflected on my experiences, questions emerged about how we, as Baptists, handle change. Surely we could do better than my experience suggested? Was there something about our heritage that uniquely shaped how we approached issues (e.g. our ecclesiology with its emphasis on local autonomy and congregational decision making)? Using recent experiences as a resource for such reflection would have proved extremely difficult, partly because of the sensitivity and immediacy of issues involved, but also because of the impossibility of establishing distinct ‘start’ and ‘end’ points to the transitions. How could this difficulty be overcome? Could we learn from our forebears and their approaches to handling issues with the potential to lead to changed practice? Some initial reading of overview English Baptist histories with the specific aim of identifying evidence of major changes in pastoral practice that had been negotiated suggested that it might⁶. Out of this the basis for my research was born.

The majority of the work presented in this submission was undertaken whilst I served as the minister of a very small Baptist church in a semi-rural location in

⁵ Notably here the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) to which these churches were affiliated, but also the Baptist Union of Scotland (BUS) and the Baptist Union of Wales (BUW)

⁶ J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot, Oxfordshire: The Baptist Historical Society, 1994), R. Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century* (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1986), B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the 17th Century*, Second ed. (Oxford: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996).

Leicestershire. Founded in the mid-eighteenth century, this was one of the earliest New Connexion General Baptist Churches and had, in its early days, played a significant role in the life of that organisation. Within a year of my arrival at the church, enormous change was thrust upon the congregation as it was forced to close its building, which had become unsafe, and members were forced to adapt to meeting for worship in a school hall. Changes in service time and format, financial struggles, and questions of survival as members began to die off were all live issues for this little congregation, and kept my feet firmly on the ground as I ventured into the realms of method and theory. Serving a New Connexion General Baptist church became an important lens for reading English Baptist history which is heavily biased in favour of Particular Baptists – what was really the story of the New Connexion, and beyond that, what of the original General Baptists, some of whose churches seemed to be alive and active despite the assertions that they drifted irrevocably into Unitarianism. Part of my aim was to see whether the General Baptist stories could be salvaged and their voice heard in a context where, I suspect, more people lean to Arminianism than Calvinism.

Firmly convinced that Baptist denominational history had the potential to provide a useful resource for theological reflection within the area of Practical Theology termed 'Church Health', I enrolled on the research programme from which this submission is the result.

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Excursus – A Pastoral Cycle – Towards A Literature Review

Experience

The experiences of working with churches embroiled in conflict and of serving a church perforce handling major issues of change had inspired a desire to explore how Baptist might better manage the process. Some initial reading of English Baptist history had demonstrated that there was potential to use this resource for theological reflection and I enrolled on a research programme to offer a structured framework for exploring this.

Analysis/Exploration

A number of important questions arose as I began to explore how I might undertake this research, and these shaped the work undertaken within the literature review process:

1. How and where does my work fit within the discipline of Practical Theology?
2. Is there evidence of history being used within practical theology, and if so what and how?
3. The discipline of history is obviously an important interface with my work, but what does it look like? In particular, how has the discipline developed, and how might any insights from that be useful for my own work?
4. What English Baptist history writing is readily available, and is it suitable for my purposes?

Reflection

Three types of resources were used in attempting to answer the questions outlined above:

1. Writing on Congregational Studies and Church Health (Questions 1 and 2)
2. Writing on the development of history as a discipline, largely an information gathering exercise (Question 3)
3. Writing on English Baptist history, largely an overview exercise (Question 4)

Action/Response

I believe the work undertaken identified a 'niche' for my research and established its potential worth as an original contribution within the field. The work presented was partly descriptive – establishing an understanding of the disciplines involved – and partly analytical/critical seeking to locate my contribution within the field.

Because a key aspect of true Practical Theology is that each iteration stands as it is, I have not revisited or revised the literature either to update its sources or to sharpen its critical edge; the strengths and weaknesses of the original submission remain.

Whilst the paper has been shortened to remove material now covered in the opening chapter, and some minor emendations made to fit the larger submission, the essential content represents the work undertaken and which laid the foundations for the next phase of the work – preparing an article suitable for publication.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter presents a literature review undertaken at the start of my research project and initially submitted in 2007 under the auspices of the DPT programme within the University of Manchester.

Getting Started – A Jigsaw Puzzle

The process of a research project can be likened to making a jigsaw puzzle.

Beginning with a jumbled mass of pieces, it is wise to start by finding the corners and building up the edges of the puzzle to establish the boundaries. It is then possible to work on the detail allowing the picture to emerge. This chapter presents the work undertaken to find the ‘corners’ of this particular ‘academic jigsaw puzzle,’ a process that, in common with other researchers I have found to be far from trivial:

‘I do not think it was very long into my research project that I found that it was true...[it] is a messy business...[a]nd the messiness does not go away.’⁷

Furthermore, whilst this chapter is clearly structured and develops a logical argument, it has only been by crossing and re-crossing disciplinary boundaries that connections have been identified and coherence discovered. As Penny Becker notes

‘It is convention to portray this process as rather neat and orderly, proceeding from well-defined theoretical propositions or one compelling moment of insight. In fact it [is] a much longer and messier process of casting about but it [is] not a random process’⁸

The background to my interest in this area and its relationship to reflection on professional practice is described in Chapter 1 of this submission; the research

⁷ M. Guest, K. Tusting, and L. Woodhead, *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post Christian Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2004). p. 125

⁸ P. E. Becker, *Congregations in Conflict, Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). p. 41

project constitutes the 'jigsaw' I am seeking to make, without the help of a box-lid showing what the end result will look like. The first task is for the 'corners' of the academic jigsaw to be identified and established, summarising the findings of reviewing literature within the fields of Practical Theology (Congregational Studies), history (including historiography) and church (especially Baptist) historical writing. This chapter is arranged so that each area is described before drawing the ideas together – as if piecing together the edge of a jigsaw - to establish questions to pursue within the next phase of the programme in order to answer a generic question: 'can historical resources be employed within the process of theological reflection?' This question has been refined and extended by the work undertaken, as this chapter demonstrates.

Before discussing in detail the findings of the literature review, some more general introductory observations are made to establish the rationale for choosing this particular 'jigsaw puzzle'.

In my experience, people's knowledge of the history of their own Christian tradition – and indeed of the Christian tradition as a whole – is very limited, with Church History often perceived as boring or irrelevant. Rowan Williams⁹ observes that 'good theology does not come from bad history.' Without an understanding of history, the influences and ideas that shaped, for example, liturgical or pastoral practice, creeds or doctrines, our ability to 'do' theology is seriously impaired, potentially arising from opinion rather than understanding. If, as I believe, Williams

⁹ R. Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005). p. 2

is right, the historical focus of my work is vital to developing a better way to think about change.

Intuitively, it appears that by better understanding our history – by attempting to discover something of how past Baptists approached and addressed issues that had the potential to bring about change, especially in pastoral practice – we can behave now in ways that will give us a more hopeful future. As White observes, ‘[f]or Baptists themselves a knowledge of the past will inform the decisions they must take today which will shape their tomorrow.’¹⁰ These sentiments, and those of Williams, are echoed by the North American Philip Thompson who writes, ‘the poor health of much Baptist theology is not congenital, but results from a wound of memory; wounded by a partial, unhealed excision of tradition.’¹¹

Theology is a wide-ranging discipline within which many strands can be identified. In recent years there has been a tendency to refer to theologies (plural) reflecting the inherent complexity of attempting to categorise different expressions of theology. My own theological training, specifically entitled 'Contextual Theology', had at its heart, permeating the more traditional elements of Biblical studies, doctrine and church history, a distinctly practical theology approach centred on the Pastoral Cycle popularised by Laurie Green, as described in Chapter 1¹².

¹⁰ B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1983). p. 6

¹¹ P. E. Thompson and A. R. Cross, *Recycling the Past or Researching History*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005). p. 185

¹² Green, *Let's Do Theology*.

The bulk of this chapter is effectively the ‘reflection’ phase of one iteration of the cycle and employs a range of resources to answer questions both of how my research can be located within the fields of practical theology and how it may be helpfully informed by insights from the discipline of history – it is concerned with establishing the corners and edges of a metaphorical jigsaw.

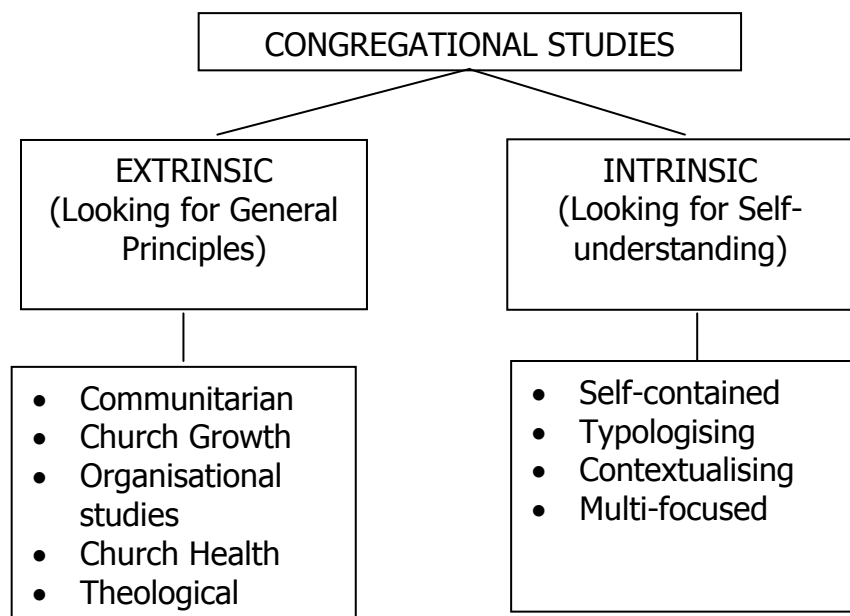
Since Practical Theology is a wide-ranging discipline, it is important to locate my work clearly within it. This is the first ‘corner’ of the ‘academic jigsaw’ to be identified, and the discussion of Congregational Studies serves this purpose. The second ‘corner’ is an understanding of the emergence and practice of history as an academic discipline. Finally, a Christian, and specifically Baptist, historical dimension is required. Once these three ‘corners’ have been established, it will be possible, in later work, to fill in the ‘jigsaw’, completing the picture and generating ‘new knowledge.’

The First 'Corner': Practical Theology, Congregational Studies

Congregational Studies is the field within Practical Theology that specifically addresses the response of congregations, and, to a lesser extent, denominations, to change; hence it forms the natural location for my research. The field is of itself diverse, e.g. responses to demographic change, adaptation of mission strategies to changing worldview, and internal (organisational) transitions; this is reflected in the range of methods developed since the mid twentieth century, when the field first emerged. Well resourced and sometimes publicly financed in the USA, in the UK it is ‘less recognized, less resourced, less institutionally embedded and less prolific...

always in danger of being ... marginalized as an academic novelty'¹³ so my work has importance in demonstrating its practical worth.

In order to locate my work within the field, I first review the typology proposed by Guest et al.¹⁴ Two distinct strands are identified, extrinsic (seeking to establish principles applicable to any congregation) and intrinsic (focussing on discrete congregations and concerned primarily with self-understanding) each of which is further sub-divided, and discussed below:



The earliest form of extrinsic work was 'Communitarian Studies' which responded to an assumption that 'community' was endangered by rapid industrialisation and growing urbanisation. A secular approach used sociological and anthropological methods – effectively 'thick description'¹⁵ - to explore congregations as part of a wider study of the local, geographical community. Within a broadly Catholic

¹³ Guest, Tusting, and Woodhead, *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post Christian Context*. p. xi

¹⁴ ———, *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post Christian Context*. p. 2

¹⁵ For explanation of this concept see, for example, C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

tradition, was a response to the perceived increasing individualisation of society, which sought to restore community. In both approaches the motivation was the generic concept of health of community, and congregations functioned as examples for wider society. More recent work within this strand¹⁶ is intrinsic, aimed specifically at congregational self-understanding.

‘Church Growth’ approaches emerged almost exclusively from an evangelical Protestant perspective where individual salvation was a key motivator, and success was measured numerically. Congregations were understood almost mechanistically, with rules or principles established to promote the desired growth. Two types of studies are identified: empirical (often statistical) studies to support specific programmes or theories, and reflective studies to evaluate the efficacy of applying church growth principles to individual congregations.

By contrast, the overtly secular field of ‘Organisational Studies’, with its focus on goals and the aim of promoting efficiency, has been mirrored by work within Congregational Studies. Some work specifically addresses church involvement in the welfare and voluntary sector issues and treats ‘faith’ as peripheral, seeing congregations as ‘voluntary associations’¹⁷ and their members ‘clients’¹⁸.

¹⁶ For example, K. Tusting, "Written Intertextuality and the Construction of Catholic Identity in a Parish Community: An Ethnographic Study" (PhD Thesis, Lancaster University, 2000).

¹⁷ M. Harris, *Organising God's Work: Challenges for Churches and Synagogues* (London: MacMillan, 1998). Cited in Guest, Tusting, and Woodhead, *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post Christian Context*.

¹⁸ H. Cameron, "Colleagues or Clients? The Relationship between Clergy and Church Members," in *Professionalism, Boundaries and the Workplace*, ed. Malin, N. (London and New York: 2000). Cited in Guest, Tusting, and Woodhead, *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post Christian Context*.

In the UK there has been less concern with efficacy and efficiency of programs and systems and more with addressing ‘Church Health’ issues, notably decision making, ecumenism and community involvement. Even so, most published work originates in the USA and includes practical handbooks aimed at local congregations as well as detailed descriptions of work with individual congregations¹⁹.

The emergence of theologies of liberation, practical theologies and gendered perspectives has encouraged the development of theology ‘from below,’ i.e. developed within the lived experience of congregations. The key voice is Browning whose method,²⁰ which has been developed and refined for a Post Modern UK context by Graham,²¹ stresses the importance of a dialogue between the congregation and its traditions.

Moving to the intrinsic strand, the focus of ‘Self-Contained Studies,’ which primarily employ participant observation and/or interview, is the life and culture of specific congregations, with an emphasis on ritual and worship,²². An important voice is Hopewell,²³ whose work, ironically described as being ‘characterized by an extrinsic church-health approach,’²⁴ focuses on symbol and the conviction that each congregation has a unique story that shapes its life.

¹⁹ For example, N. T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997), N. T. Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), J. W. Carroll, C. S. Dudley, and W. McKinney, *Handbook for Congregational Studies* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986).

²⁰ Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.

²¹ E. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London and New York: Mowbray, 1996).

²² For example, L. Francis, *Church Watch: Christianity in the Countryside* (London: SPCK, 1996), M. Stringer, *On the Perception of Worship* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1999).

²³ J. F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

²⁴ Guest, Tusting, and Woodhead, *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post Christian Context*. p. 9

Most studies employ some form of typology to describe congregations such as denomination, size or churchpersonship. The ‘Typologising’ category concerns approaches that seek to group congregations more creatively to generate new insights; a number of key voices from the USA and the UK are identified²⁵ with Penny Becker’s²⁶ work on congregations and conflict of particular interest, since it was my experience of congregations in conflict that initially prompted this research.

‘Contextualising Studies’ may be small-scale, relating a congregation to its local context, or large-scale, relating to broad social trends. Guest et al note refer to several small-scale studies ranging from consideration of social and economic factors to the relationship of church and ‘folk’ religion²⁷. By contrast, large-scale studies are concerned with broad issues, e.g. relating congregational decline to aspects of modernity or consideration of ‘Generation X.’²⁸

Attempting to categorise Congregational Studies is far from trivial, and not all work fits within these headings. Guest et al find it necessary to create a final ‘Multi-focussed’ category covering studies which combine several insights and approaches, and/or cross the intrinsic/extrinsic divide.

In my view, the distinction of ‘extrinsic’ and ‘intrinsic’ approaches proves inadequate and I postulate an alternative model in an attempt to overcome this.

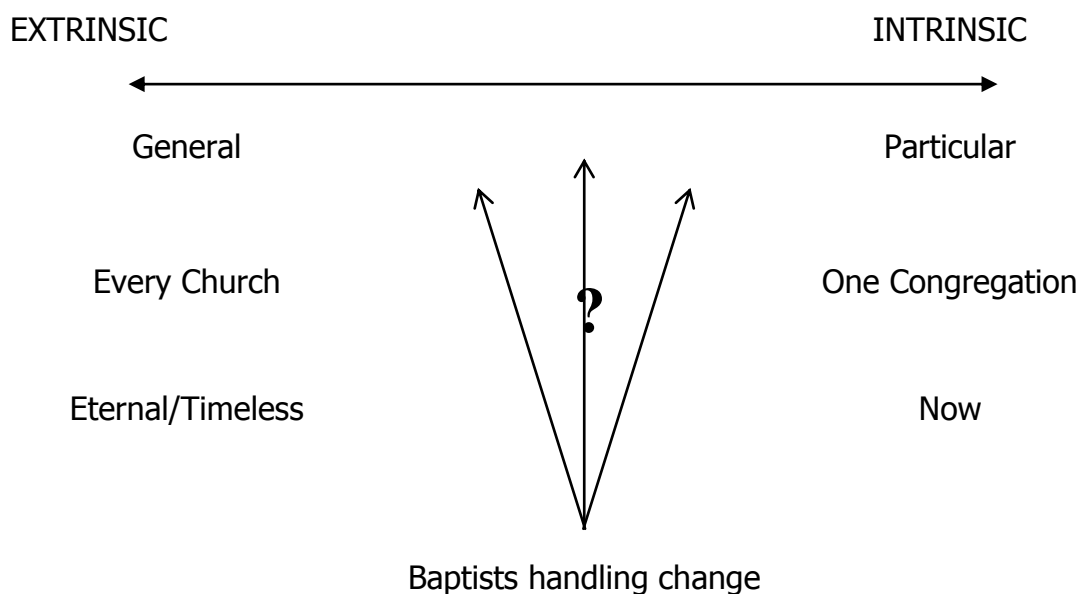
²⁵ From the USA: D. A. Roozen, W. M. McKinnney, and J. W. Carroll, *Varieties of Religious Presence: Mission in Public Life* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), R. S. Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins. Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988).

From the UK: L. Woodhead and P. Heelas, *Religion in Modern Times: An Interpretive Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

²⁶ Becker, *Congregations in Conflict, Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*.

²⁷ Guest, Tusting, and Woodhead, *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post Christian Context*. Pp 13-15.

²⁸ ———, *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post Christian Context*. pp 15 - 16



Congregational Studies is a diverse field and, without suggesting that Guest's work is definitive³⁰, it provides a framework for locating my work, particularly if expressed as a spectrum. From the typologies suggested, there is a clear link with the extrinsic 'Church Health' approach along with insights from the work of Hopewell (on symbol and narrative) and Becker (on conflict) in the intrinsic strand and these are discussed in greater detail below.

An Intrinsic Emphasis: Church Health

Church Health embraces a wide range of literature; the work of key North American writers, insights from the Church of England and some specifically Baptist material is discussed below, keeping in mind two distinct aims:

- (i) To provide an overview of the work in this field
- (ii) To identify specific attempts to employ history or historical resources within the methods described

³⁰ For example another work specifically referring to a UK context is H. Cameron et al., *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook* (London: SCM Press, 2005). This book centres on four key disciplines, anthropology, sociology, organizational studies and theology.

Handbook for Congregational Studies and its Successors

Much of the literature owes its style and content to the work of a consortium of USA writers, whose *Handbook for Congregational Studies*³¹ was groundbreaking. Recognising the significance of this book, its approach is discussed in detail.

The *Handbook* ‘emerged out of the team’s effort to place the congregation itself rather than scholarly individuals at the center.’³² The phrase ‘Church Health’ does not appear, but the focus on congregational self-understanding and aim of transformation anticipate use of the term. The writers identify four distinct aspects of a congregation, namely - ‘identity,’ ‘context,’ ‘process,’ and ‘program’ each of which may be studied, because ‘they are dimensions of congregational life which are recognizable to the people who invest their energies in churches.’³³

‘Identity’ is how the church speaks of itself as ‘we’ and is reflected in such diverse features as history, heritage, worldview, symbols, ritual, demography and character. Particularly significant to my work is the role of history. Two approaches are identified – the collection of oral histories and the production of a time line. These oral histories are inherently partial, referring to the relatively recent past and their focus is directed by the researcher(s), centring on questions of change and canvass of opinions, suggestions for which are included in the *Handbook*³⁴. Selection of individuals for interview shapes the story told, but the authors argue that a clear sense of ‘plot’ can be identified. The time line approach is less constrained because it allows the chronology to extend back to the foundation of the congregation and it can be emended later by drawing on additional resources; furthermore, its physical

³¹ Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*.

³² ———, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*. Preface (no page number)

³³ ———, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*. p. 13

³⁴ ———, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*. p. 24

layout is designed to include significant local, national or global events, making connections to the wider context.³⁵

The geographical and social setting of the congregation form its 'Context.' Whilst employing appropriate local census data, studying context also involves reflection on the wider community, e.g. where power is located, what groups and organisations exist, etc. to enable a clearer understanding of local needs to inform the church's mission strategy.

The 'Process' of a congregation

'... is not what happens, but *how it happens*. It is the link between the identity, values, and commitment of the members, and the specific programs which the members attend and support... the underlying flow and dynamics of a congregation that knit it together in its common life and affect its morale and climate'³⁶ (emphasis original)

Drawing extensively on insights from organisational studies, this aspect addresses both the 'feel' of the congregation and the processes, formal and informal, it employs.

Finally, 'Program' 'give[s] concrete expression to beliefs and norms held by members, past and present; it carries the values to which members commit financial resources and energies.'³⁷ Studying its programs aids the church in determining how best to employ resources to achieve its aims.

³⁵ The layout suggested has a line one third of the way from the top of a sheet of 'butcher paper' with dates marked along its length. Events and people significant to the life of the congregation are identified below the line, with local, national or global events above it.

³⁶ Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*. p. 81

³⁷ ———, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*. p. 120

The closing chapter of the book stresses the need for each congregation to determine and combine those elements helpful for its own situation. Readers are reminded that techniques are not just for resolving ‘messes’ but also for identifying and exploring new opportunities – a positive, proactive stance I endorse.

Since publication of the *Handbook*, the authors, and others, have continued to develop and refine their ideas. Concurrently, the context in which they are working – locally, nationally and globally, has altered. Later works reflect this ongoing development.

*Congregation and Community*³⁸ is a compilation of in-depth analyses of 23 North American congregations responding to large-scale social changes. Seeking to provide an alternative to church growth emphasis on growth and decline, the authors define success as ‘the congregation’s survival as the institution it determines it should be’³⁹ and draw on the work of Gaylord Noyce⁴⁰ to identify four options: -

- (i) To become a niche congregation
- (ii) To decline
- (iii) To adapt
 - a. To attract new, similar people
 - b. To change its culture and programmes
 - c. To change the structural dynamics
- (iv) To move

In analysing and telling the stories of congregations within these categories, the writers are keenly aware of the contingency of the exercise:

³⁸ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*.

³⁹ ———, *Congregation and Community*, p. 5

⁴⁰ G. Noyce, *Survival and Mission for the City Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975).

‘We must be content to understand the history and prospects of our congregations as they appear [now]..., with all the ambiguity that goes with tracing social patterns...’⁴¹

The book demonstrates the practical outworking of the *Handbook*, draws new insights from church growth, and provides a snapshot of real North American congregations at the end of the twentieth century (a historical significance).

*Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*⁴² is not simply an update, rather a thoroughgoing review has been undertaken and new material on leadership added.

The practical focus remains and four ‘frames’ are identified for studies: -

- Ecological – geographical and historical context
- Culture – identity
- Resources – concepts of money, people and buildings as ‘capital’
- Process – how things occur.

The suggested approach to history, timelines and oral history, is identical to that in the *Handbook* but, significantly, it has been moved from ‘identity’ to ‘context.’ This changes its role in the study and I fear has the potential to diminish the significance afforded to it, rendering it part of the backdrop against which ‘we’ live, work and worship.

*Congregations in Transition*⁴³ adopts a new metaphor through which to express, and revisit, existing ideas. The Exodus story provides a framework for local

⁴¹ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*. p. 62

⁴² Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*.

congregations to attempt a response to internal or external change, reflected by the chapter headings:

- Getting the Lay of the Land
- Sizing Up Your Tabernacle
- Looking for Pillars of Fire
- Across the Jordan: Settling in the Promised Land

Central to ‘sizing up the Tabernacle’ is a historical dimension. Indeed, the authors observe that ‘[h]istory not only authorizes change, it mandates it’⁴⁴ and advocate the use of ‘history as a resource for change, to explore... [the] past and weave these facts, events and stories together to explain the present and open new options for the future.’⁴⁵ Whilst I endorse this view, it is important to understand what local congregations actually undertake. The method adopted is an adaptation of the ‘timeline’ described in the *Handbook* into five separate (but related) timelines: -

- A basic timeline of events in both church and community
- A buildings and facilities timeline
- A leadership and decisions timeline, focussing on who led the congregation and how decisions were made
- A resources, people and money timeline
- A worship and music timeline

By producing these timelines in a large scale, visual form, congregations can readily identify how change has been part of their experience. The emphasis on recalled history and living memory remains, and there is still no sense of critical engagement

⁴³ C. S. Dudley and N. T. Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing and Adapting in Changing Communities* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

⁴⁴ Dudley and Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing and Adapting in Changing Communities*. p. 60

⁴⁵ ———, *Congregations in Transition: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing and Adapting in Changing Communities*.

with historical resources or attention to the partiality inevitable in gathering views of members. Overall, I sense an increasingly prescriptive approach to the historical aspect, possibly reflecting the authors' experience or agenda, e.g. why is there a 'music and worship' timeline and not, perhaps, 'Christian education,' 'social action' or 'denominational matters' timelines?

Other North American Church Health Literature: Alban Institute and Leadership Network

Whilst the *Handbook* and its derivatives are of primary import, the insights of other writers must not be neglected. The work of two important organisations is outlined, with illustrative examples of their work.

'The Alban Institute ...[is] a major resource for American congregations facing the challenges of a changing society'⁴⁶ and publishes work in the field of Church Health, with the aim of developing 'strong congregational leaders who have the creativity, the endurance, and the joy to do the work needed to fulfill their congregations' particular callings'⁴⁷. Often with an overtly spiritual/Biblical starting point, and drawing heavily on behavioural science and pastoral care and counselling approaches, topics addressed in their publications include size transition, pastoral transitions and conflict resolution⁴⁸. For example, Loren Mead⁴⁹ begins by defining the tasks of the Church (as bearer of good news) and the local congregation (as koinonia, kerygma, didache and diakonia) before considering practical matters of structure, finance, and clericalism. The ideas of behavioural scientist Kurt Lewin

⁴⁶ From 'About Alban' <http://www.alban.org/about.aspx?id=176> accessed 23rd May 2007

⁴⁷ From 'About Alban' <http://www.alban.org/about.aspx?id=176> accessed 23rd May 2007

⁴⁸ Authors include, for example Richard Bass, David B Lott, Loren B Mead, Peter Steinke, Gill Rendle and Alice Mann. An extensive catalogue of available works is available from

<http://www.alban.org/uploadedFiles/Alban/Bookstore> accessed 23 May 2007

⁴⁹ L. B. Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (New York: Alban Institute, 1994).

underlie her approach to considering change, which includes a step-by-step approach to assist leaders in applying the ideas. There is little or no overt historical input in these approaches.

Similarly, the ‘Leadership Network ... [fosters] church innovation and growth through strategies, programs, tools and resources that are consistent with our far-reaching mission: to *identify, connect and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact*’⁵⁰ (emphasis original). The network advocates a pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit, reflecting a Post Modern worldview,⁵¹ as evident in the organisational studies approach adopted in their Church Health publications. For example, *Leading Congregational Change*⁵² is in two sections, each having a step-by-step approach. The first section prepares the leadership team to acquire the required mindset and skills; the second leads the congregation through an eight-step process to change outlook and practice. The technique owes much to the *Handbook*, parts of which are repackaged in a prescriptive, tick-box approach, with the timeline reduced to a table to be completed. Whilst this approach may appear more systematic than the “butchers paper and marker pen” method, it is equally partial, loses flexibility and far less accessible. Whilst the appeal to a new generation and a different learning style is to be applauded, I am not convinced that the work adds significant new insights.

⁵⁰ http://www.leadnet.org/about_OurMission.asp accessed 23 May 2007

⁵¹ For example, their publications notably include Brian McLaren’s ‘New Kind of Christian’ trilogy: B. McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word after That: A Tale of Faith, Doubt and a New Kind of Christianity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), B. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), B. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

⁵² J. H. Furr, M. Bonem, and J. Herrington, *Leading Congregational Change: Workbook* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

UK Church Health Literature

From a specifically UK perspective, *The Healthy Churches Handbook*,⁵³ defined as being ‘for anyone who cares about the well-being of the church,’⁵⁴ emerged from a Church of England initiative. It has a clear emphasis on health (defined as ‘wholeness’) and growth (understood as ‘nurture’ rather than numerical increase) and combines an exploration of seven marks of a healthy church⁵⁵ with a detailed programme to develop a church profile. An innovative aspect of the material is its ‘Angel of the Church’ exercise based on insights from Hopewell⁵⁶ and Wink⁵⁷. The book is easily accessible and ideal for use by a local congregation. However, it is very much centred in the here and now, with scant reference to history⁵⁸. I feel this lack of retrospection is a weakness, since considering ‘how we got here’ helps a congregation to establish ‘how do we move on.’

Baptist Church Health Literature

There is very little explicitly Baptist material on Church Health; only two examples have been identified.

⁵³ R. Warren, *The Healthy Churches Handbook* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

⁵⁴ Warren, *The Healthy Churches Handbook*. p. 1

⁵⁵ The seven marks are: -

- Energized by faith
- Outward looking focus
- Seeks to find out what God wants
- Faces the cost of change and growth
- Operates as a community
- Makes room for all
- Does a few things and does them well

⁵⁶ Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*.

⁵⁷ W. Wink, *Engaging the Powers : Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992), W. Wink, *Naming the Powers : The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), W. Wink, *Unmasking the Powers : The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

⁵⁸ Whilst the examples given indicate some opinion-based recollection of the recent past, the longer term ‘story’ is not recalled or told and no external historical resources are employed.

*Journeying Through Conflict*⁵⁹ is a pragmatic response to congregations embroiled in damaging conflict. Drawing on Biblical principles, its aim is that ‘hurting churches can once again become healthy churches.’⁶⁰ Accessibility masks the quality of the underlying theology, which draws heavily on work by the Alban Institute⁶¹ and the London Mennonite Centre Bridge Builders⁶².

Fit4Life: Promoting Healthy Growth,⁶³ is an Australian resource providing practical guidance for congregations seeking to become healthier. Again drawing on Alban Institute and Mennonite resources, and starting with metaphors of health resorts, health kicks, health regimes and healthy lifestyles, the book offers Bible studies, teaching input and exercises under six headings:

- Church Health and self-awareness
- Healthy Communication
- Handling Difference in healthy ways
- Healthy decision-making
- Clarifying role expectations
- Covenanting for Health.

These Baptist resources, rooted in work of respected authors and organisations, are deliberately practical and focus entirely on the present/future. No reference is made to the past, even the immediate past, and this is, in my view, a significant omission.

Firstly, the present situation is inextricably linked to the congregation’s own past:

⁵⁹ V. Lassetter and E. Whalley, *Journeying through Conflict* (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2004).

⁶⁰ Lassetter and Whalley, *Journeying through Conflict*. p. 1

⁶¹ For example, A. P. Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behaviour* (San Francisco: Alban Institute, 2000), P. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (San Francisco: Alban Institute, 1996), P. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (San Francisco: Alban Institute, 1993).

⁶² Website <http://www.menno.org.uk/> accessed 7th June 2007

⁶³ B. U. o. Victoria, *Fit4Life Manual* (Hawthorn, Victoria: Baptist Union of Victoria, 2004).

recognition of recent past factors is an important aspect of transforming present and future practice. Secondly, the examples of earlier generations – healthy and unhealthy – provide a resource for more objective reflection in situations where the current issues may be emotive. Finally, English Baptists are a peculiar people, there are threads in our heritage which are unlike those of American Episcopalians, Mennonites or indeed of any other Christian tradition. Simply lifting ideas, however worthy, without this historical self-awareness seems to deny the very holism sought by Church Health approaches.

The review of Church Health literature has revealed a distinct body of knowledge, predominantly from North America, which has been embraced and endorsed within the UK. The limited UK-based denominational work to adapt techniques for local use has lost the, already limited, historical dimension. Whilst the *Handbook* and its derivatives see oral history and timelines as important to a congregation's self-understanding, I have found little evidence of use being made of written resources and am concerned by what appears to be an increasingly prescriptive approach. I retain my original conviction that history is a largely overlooked resource for theological reflection.

An Intrinsic Emphasis: Stories, Styles and Cultures

Attention is now turned to the 'intrinsic strand' of Congregational Studies⁶⁴ and three voices, James Hopewell, Penny Becker and Philip Richter, selected because their work relates to my area of research.

⁶⁴ Guest, Tusting, and Woodhead, *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post Christian Context*.

James Hopewell

Hopewell's *Congregations: Stories and Structures* is 'a complex work that reflects his varied career and diverse interests,'⁶⁵ in which his skilled theoretical work is complemented by examples drawn from real congregations. Identifying four different, equally valid, and overlapping, approaches to the study of congregations, Contextual, Mechanical (mechanistic), Organic and Symbolic⁶⁶, Hopewell's distinctive contribution is in the area of symbolic studies and the employment of literary techniques. Drawing on the work of Stephen Crites⁶⁷, the importance of story both in making sense of experience and in connecting past, present and future is identified:

'Earlier and forthcoming times at the moment do not exist, yet they are essential dimensions of the experienced present... experience of the lived present must have a narrative character, because it necessarily ties the perception of the moment to the memory of past events and to the anticipation of the future... experience contains the sense of both before and after as well as the distinctions among past, present, and future, enabling us to comprehend our persistence through time.'⁶⁸

This explicit relationship between the story of a congregation and history connects with my sense that history is an important resource for theological reflection.

Hopewell uses Northrop Frye's 'circle of western literature'⁶⁹ to underpin his work, deriving a fourfold approach of Canonic, Gnostic, Charismatic and Empiric worldviews which he aligns with literary genres⁷⁰ to provide a model that, whilst not exhaustive, provides a tool to construct an impression of a congregation using

⁶⁵ Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. p. xi

⁶⁶ ———, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. p. 46

⁶⁷ S. C. Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971).

⁶⁸ Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. p. 47

⁶⁹ ———, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. p. 67.

⁷⁰ ———, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. p. 72, Figure B

interviews, questionnaires or participant observation. Central to Hopewell's work is the concept of narrative: story recounts, informs (changes) and accounts for social character. Furthermore,

‘... in the Christian Community is embedded the Christian story that judges and redeems the other actions of the narrative. By so doing, story *transforms* group character’⁷¹ (emphasis original)

A key feature is the concept of the ‘Parish Genius,’ – effectively the spirit of the congregation⁷² and its link to classical mythology or folktale. He is quite clear about his reasons for choosing myth rather than Biblical narrative for this purpose⁷³:

- (i) Biblical material is already familiar and facile comparisons are readily drawn; using myth enables creative engagement with ideas
- (ii) Biblical material does not describe the ethos, or personality, of a congregation; its purpose is rhetorical not metaphorical.

To discern the character of the congregation, it is necessary to discover its story (plot), identifying how this links, unfolds, thickens and twists. The link between ‘parish story’ and history is self-evident and Hopewell offers some telling comments on church histories...

‘Many local church histories are written without reference to the elements that produce tensions and strains... concentrat[ing] instead on dates and accomplishments; they avoid the tension that accompanies the complicated struggle to maintain and enliven any community. Most local church histories are therefore boring.’⁷⁴

Hopewell's focus on story (narrative and character) is inextricably linked with his understandings of Church Health and mission. In the epilogue two key observations

⁷¹ ———, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. p. 104

⁷² This is an idea that seems to echo or, possibly to anticipate, at least in embryo, ideas developed by Walter Wink. What distinguishes him from Wink is Hopewell's use of classical mythology and folk tales to explore a congregation's story and character. Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence*.

⁷³ Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. p. 113.

⁷⁴ ———, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. p. 157

are made. Firstly, '[a] healthy congregation, like a healthy family, is one that understands and tells its stories.'⁷⁵ I would assert that the story of a congregation, or of a denomination, is broadly synonymous with its history. Not merely dates and places, which Hopewell sees as dull, but the tensions and disagreements which add richness and depth to the plot. Secondly, '[if] through greater sensitivity to its stories a local church better discerns its constitution and mission, the effort of narrative analysis will have a significant result.'⁷⁶ Here is the voice of the practical theologian – this analysis is not self-serving, its aim is to allow the church fulfil its mission in a way that is healthy. These concluding thoughts in Hopewell's work echo the aims and goals of my own enterprise, and offer valuable insights in approaching the use of historical materials.

Penny Becker

The theme of congregational 'identity' or 'character' is central to Penny Becker's work, which explores the way in which this is related to the likelihood and manifestation of intracongregational conflict. Based on empirical study of 23 diverse congregations,⁷⁷ her methods included participant observation, interviews and study of congregational documents 'like sermons, annual reports, newsletters, minutes of meetings, bulletins and *histories*⁷⁸' (emphasis mine). The central tenet of her argument is that

'congregations develop distinct cultures that comprise local understandings of identity and mission and that can be understood analytically as bundles of core tasks and legitimate ways of doing things... [they] are not completely idiosyncratic, but... come in patterns

⁷⁵ ———, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. p. 193

⁷⁶ ———, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*.

⁷⁷ She uses bipolar definitions small /large (divided at a membership of around 150); congregational/hierarchical; liberal/conservative

⁷⁸ Becker, *Congregations in Conflict, Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*. p. 4

shaped by the larger institutional environment that limits their range of variation.⁷⁹

From her research, Becker developed a four-fold typology plus a catchall category for those not so easily defined.

‘House of Worship’ congregations emphasise worship and religious education, which form their primary means of witness, although there is often generous giving to missionary organisations. There may be little sense of connectedness between members and it is rare for major issues to be addressed. Church life is generally separate from everyday life.

‘Family Congregations’ retain the core of worship and religious education, but are characterised by a strong sense of belonging, which may become cliquish and makes it difficult for newcomers to integrate. These are congregations in which significant families often hold more power than official leaders and ‘the building itself is valued as an important part of the congregation’s identity.’⁸⁰ Family rituals of births, marriages and deaths are central to church life and complex issues are avoided “we don’t talk about that,” “we don’t take sides, we’re here to worship.”⁸¹

Retaining the central elements of worship and nurture, and with strong inter-personal relationships, ‘Community Congregations’ are more open to newcomers and stress ‘authenticity’. They are usually more eclectic and participative than family congregations with a stronger emphasis on tolerance and ‘process over outcome’ in addressing issues. Becker observes that, of her four main types, this is the most

⁷⁹ ———, *Congregations in Conflict, Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*. p. 7

⁸⁰ ———, *Congregations in Conflict, Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*. p. 86

⁸¹ ———, *Congregations in Conflict, Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*. p. 87

likely to experience conflict. Usually the outcome is a compromise, but people may leave if they dislike the decision.

The 'Leader Congregation' sees itself in an overtly strategic role, being involved at denominational level and concerned with global issues. Such congregations tend to appoint well-known clergy, in whom considerable power is located, and to engage actively in social issues. The emphasis on interpersonal relationships is less than in other models and it is possible for people to drop out unnoticed.

Becker recognises that these models cannot describe every congregation. Some may be hybrid, with elements of two or more models co-existing; there may also be a lifecycle effect whereby congregations transform from one style to another. Where transition or hybrid identity exists there is considerable potential for conflicts to occur.

This work is important because it recognises the value of congregational self-understanding, here in relation to issues of conflict, and because it recognises the validity of each identity-type (it is non-hierarchical). Like Hopewell, Becker acknowledges the role of history, although it is not a major element of her thesis: '[a]necdotal evidence suggests that congregational history is important...'⁸² Whilst she hints at the potential importance of denominational cultures, Becker does not explore it, noting instead the prevalence of inter-denominational 'borrowing' of ideas and resources.

⁸² ———, *Congregations in Conflict, Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*. p. 188

Philip Richter

This apparent neglect of work addressing denominational cultures is the subject of a short essay by Philip Richter who raises important questions about this ‘Cinderella’⁸³ aspect of Congregational Studies. Richter observes that for many people issues of style, theological stance or provision of activities are more important than denominational affiliation. Further, it is difficult to define denominational cultures because they are subject to ongoing change, partly due to influence from other denominations and from non-denominational movements such as Evangelicalism. Attempts by the Baptist Union *Five Core Values for a Gospel People* and Methodist Church *Our Calling*⁸⁴ to redefine and reassert denominational identity against a background of globalisation and rapid change are noted with a comment that

‘... denominations, revisiting their cultural identity may face an uphill task ... given that, in the dynamic reflexive macro-culture of late modernity, individuals, and increasingly congregations are suspicious of ready-made cultural blueprints...’⁸⁵

Without denying the value of thick, ethnographic studies, he observes that the focus on specific congregations has tended to deny the more general applicability of what is discovered. Even where there has been analysis of multiple congregations (e.g. Ammerman⁸⁶ or Becker⁸⁷) the potential for intradenominational analysis has not been explored.

Richter argues that although individuals and congregations may feel less concerned about denominational identity, it remains important noting that: -

⁸³ Richter, "Denominational Cultures: The Cinderella of Congregational Studies." p. 169

⁸⁴ His terms for The Baptist Union of Great Britain and The Methodist Church of Great Britain

⁸⁵ Richter, "Denominational Cultures: The Cinderella of Congregational Studies." p. 171

⁸⁶ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*.

⁸⁷ Becker, *Congregations in Conflict, Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*.

- (i) 'Congregations will be constrained to some degree by their denominational heritage and will not ... be totally free to define their style of decision-making...' ⁸⁸
- (ii) 'Congregations will ... be constrained by denominational expectations attached to appropriate forms of worship.' ⁸⁹

His empirical research centres on the extent to which individuals subconsciously absorb denominational culture, and are surprised when another tradition behaves differently. Although there is no explicit reference to history, its significance in shaping the 'heritage' and 'expectations' of denominational cultures is, in my view, self-evident.

Richter's work offers a valuable corrective to other writers by recognising the importance of denominational factors in understanding how or why local congregations behave as they do, and what might be meant by 'healthy.' Further, I believe his research fits in the 'mid-spectrum' range I suggested earlier for my own work, whereby the strengths of both intrinsic and extrinsic approaches can be appropriated and enhanced to greater effect.

The review of work in the field of Congregational Studies indicates that within the Church Health genre there has been some recognition of the role of history both in congregational self-understanding and denominational cultures. I would also argue that, notwithstanding the categorisation of Guest et al⁹⁰, there is a clear 'extrinsic' aspect to the work of Hopewell and Becker, affirming my view that my work has a 'both/and' applicability to a local congregation, to Baptists generally, and potentially even to the wider Church.

⁸⁸ Richter, "Denominational Cultures: The Cinderella of Congregational Studies." p.172

⁸⁹ ———, "Denominational Cultures: The Cinderella of Congregational Studies."

⁹⁰ Guest, Tusting, and Woodhead, *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post Christian Context*.

The Second 'Corner': History and Historiography

I have argued that the Church Health approach to history is largely uncritical and potentially superficial, but as yet no effective basis for critique has been offered. In order to address this aspect, it is first necessary to gain an appreciation of developments in the academic discipline of history so that insights can be employed creatively in evaluating historical resources for theological reflection. A review of literature on historiography is the second 'corner' of my 'jigsaw.'

It is important to define what is meant by the terms 'history' and 'historiography' in this chapter since usage in the literature can be ambiguous. The word 'history' has multiple meanings. Here it is used primarily to refer to the academic discipline concerned with researching and interpreting aspects of the past, though on occasion it refers to documents. The word 'historiography' is used to refer to the study of the methods and writing of history.

Drawing extensively on the work of Appleby et al⁹¹ and Iggers,⁹² recognised as standard works on historiography, the development of history, a discipline where North American and Western European (specifically 'English') approaches are assumed normative, and the significance of which appears unquestioned,⁹³ is outlined.

Appleby et al observe that when historians investigate their own discipline they:

⁹¹ J. Appleby, L. Hunt, and M. Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W W Norton and Company, 1994).

⁹² G. G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

⁹³ Whilst it is feasible that insights from non-western/northern hemisphere and non-English speaking cultures would provide additional insights, this has not been explored further.

‘... run the serious risk of giving [the] story a very teleological cast: the history of history could only move forward... when the supposed defects and deficiencies of past conceptions were recognised and corrected. By definition, the defects and deficiencies are those characteristics that dropped out of history as it became a modern, academic discipline.’⁹⁴

Notwithstanding this caution, it is possible to discern something of history’s development since the Enlightenment, and specifically in the last century.

As children of the Enlightenment, historians believed that objectivity was feasible and that humankind was progressing towards an ever-improving society, a utopian dream, where more knowledge was automatically better, and prosperity was the marker of success. A commitment to scientific method, and a tireless quest for ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity,’ made extensive, if uncritical, use of old documents. Only in the 19th and 20th Centuries did professional historians really embrace the concept of hermeneutics, already established in Biblical study. Despite new perspectives from mainland Europe and North America, the so-called ‘heroic science’ model of history existed until well into the twentieth century. However, World War II finally destroyed the myths of agenda free science and ‘progress’ allowing the nascent ideas, which would prove significant in the twentieth century, to develop. Key themes have been identified⁹⁵ and are discussed below.

Some Key Developments

The emergence of the concept of ‘nationhood’, and the desire for a strong national identity, significantly impacted historical writing in the nineteenth century,

⁹⁴ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*. p. 63

⁹⁵ Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*.

Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*.

particularly in mainland Europe and North America.⁹⁶ Extensive use was made of state archives, to support a perceived national identity, although administrative, economic and social records were deemed irrelevant to this task and ignored. Americans, as citizens of a relatively new nation, whose immigrant forebears reflected diverse cultural and religious backgrounds (the native and non-white population was ignored), needed a shared identity. Historians sought to demonstrate that formation of the Union was inevitable, and to shape a shared understanding of the past that would be projected into the future. The 'frontier' became a vital measurement of progress, easily monitored on a map, and only questioned when the western-most shore was reached. Whilst the story stressed equality, the persistence of slavery, and the ill treatment of blacks and Native Americans, show it was flawed, inconsistencies which later caused major disquiet and conflict.

From Europe, Karl Marx' theories of economic determinism and social struggle significantly influenced history in western democratised nations. Marx asserted that economics was the driving force in 'progress' and had a direct influence on society, culturally and politically. Those who controlled production held all the power and dictated the path of history, whilst those who did not were powerless. The concept of market-forces and the significance of economics created a new emphasis in the 20th century as 'economic history' began to be written. In Britain, one influence of Marxist ideas concerning class struggle was the beginning of 'histories from below,' where the focus shifted from powerful and influential individuals to the ordinary, working people.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ To a lesser extent, this also happened in Britain. For example it is satirised in W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, *1066 and All That: A Memorable History of England* (London: Methuen, 1930).

⁹⁷ For example, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963).

In France a very different way of thinking emerged, in what became known as the *Annales* school⁹⁸. Rather than being concerned with concepts of state (or nation), economy, religion and law, scholars identified links between geography, economics, anthropology and historiography, expressed more generally as ‘culture.’ Instead of a single ‘theory’ or ‘law’ of history, its multidisciplinary quality was recognised and embraced. A significant feature of this approach was its view of ‘a plurality of co-existing times, not only among different civilizations but also within each civilization.’⁹⁹. Expressed simply, the *Annales* school was primarily interested in *synchronic* rather than *diachronic* approaches. Further developments included both semiotics and scientific studies before becoming more concerned with mentalités (broadly, psychology). Part of its merit is in providing an alternative to the Marxist economic focus and avoiding the assumption of western industrialisation.

In the USA, the early twentieth century saw a new influx of European immigrants, including Jews and Roman Catholics, whose presence challenged the North American Protestant norm. As the century progressed, wider access to college/university education meant more women, black and Hispanic students studied history and questioned the presumption of a white-male norm for history. Later, development of computer databases, and facilities to construct and analyse complex mathematical models for demographic data, seriously influenced the way that history developed. A key shift was from universality to particularity – rather than a global focus/drive there was a focus on discrete contexts and cultures. It was no longer plausible to claim that the story told by white, predominantly male,

⁹⁸ Key writers in this area include Braudel, 16th Century Mediterranean history, and Ladurie, 14th Century Cathar heresy trials

⁹⁹ Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*. p. 56

historians centring on the lives of powerful individuals, assuming objectivity and inevitability must be valid. Questions of authenticity needed to be addressed; rather than one 'history', there emerged the potential of 'histories.'

Developments in Germany must be understood against the backdrop of events in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The unification of Germany under Bismarck, the Weimar republic and the catastrophe of Nazism were all significant, as is Germany's strong heritage of social science with roots in classical German culture and idealist philosophy. Georg Iggers¹⁰⁰ identifies the key assumptions:

- i. History is a historical social science
- ii. A close connection exists between scientific research and social practice
- iii. History is a linear process
- iv. The political responsibility of the historian is towards a humanely organised society

Unlike the French *Annales* historians, whose focus was primarily on the Medieval period, German social science historians centred on the processes of transformation in contemporary industrial society. A distinctive feature of this approach was its reticence towards the quantitative methods popular in France and America. Instead, considerable energy was devoted to gathering oral histories, notably from the labour classes and from women, the aim of which was to establish what people remembered and how they reflected upon it:

'What matters in these interviews is not the reconstruction of what was, but what people remembered. The important thing is not whether these

¹⁰⁰ _____, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*.

memories were correct or not, but how they reflect the ways in which these men and women experienced their pasts.’¹⁰¹

Iggers notes the particularity of these developments: ‘the intellectual precursors of Historical Social Science in Germany were not American social scientists or French *Annales* historians but Germans...’¹⁰².

The Second World War and ensuing Cold War forced historians and scientists to rethink their presuppositions on objectivity, since the claimed inherent impartiality of science was unsustainable when powerful, military nations could direct, if not control, the direction of scientific research. Might the same be true of history? Even before World War II, questions about the scientific and literary nature of history were being asked. All written history has a literary form with a ‘plot’ and ‘characters’; was it possible, without returning to the epics and myths of ancient civilisations, for the concept of narrative to be revived?¹⁰³

Lawrence Stone¹⁰⁴ notes how narrative history differs from ‘scientific’ methods in that it is descriptive rather than analytical and that the viewpoint shifts from macroscopic to microscopic, focussing on individuals and small groups rather than nations and statistics. The revival of narrative history emerged alongside, and is critiqued by, developments in literary theory, linguistics and the emergence of Post Modernism.

¹⁰¹ ———, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*. p. 75

¹⁰² ———, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*. p. 71

¹⁰³ For example, H. V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973).

¹⁰⁴ L. Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past and Present* 85 (1979).

Although attempting to define Post Modernity is difficult, the key thinkers in this emerging worldview can be identified¹⁰⁵ as can key elements of Post Modernist thinking¹⁰⁶: -

- i. Rejection or questioning of belief in ‘progress’
- ii. ‘Self’ seen as an ideological construct
- iii. Denial of the certainty of knowledge
- iv. Questioning the ‘objectivity’ of science/scientific
- v. ‘Reality’ – use of quotation marks in order to problematise this concept
- vi. Specifically in relation to history, challenge its truth, objectivity and its narrative form

The extent and nature of work in this field – including linguistics and semiotics - is complex and beyond the scope of this discussion, however it is important to recognise the contribution of this school of thought to historiography. Derrida’s concept of deconstruction asserts that texts *repress* as well as *express* and are therefore not objective or necessarily truthful. Deconstruction demonstrates that multiple interpretations of a given text are (or may be) plausible. It is not valid to assume that a text has a single, self evident, meaning. This is further complicated by the cultural nature of language, symbol and codes. The meaning of words, phrases or texts is determined from within a discrete culture – e.g. nation, race, faith group or academic discipline. Insider language creates power within a context and bars understanding beyond it. This becomes significant when a written text is used beyond the control of those who created it: in theory, there could be infinite interpretations with no clear meaning. For the writing (and reading) of history, this

¹⁰⁵ For example: Nietzsche and Heidegger (Germany), Michel Foucault, Lacan, Barthes and Lyotard (France) Jacques Derrida (Algerian).

¹⁰⁶ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*. p. 202, adapted

implies a shift from seeking a ‘cause-effect relationship’ in what is recorded to endeavouring to determine what ‘truth’ the author is endeavouring to generate and how this is being done.

Alongside the work on linguistics has been the development of literary theory in relation to history. Hayden White is a strong proponent of the idea that ‘historical narratives are verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found*...’¹⁰⁷ (emphasis original). In essence, his view is that whilst it includes verifiable facts (names, dates, places, etc.), historians’ work is a *construction*, a work of fiction, rather than a *reconstruction*, reporting undisputed facts. The interpretation of data, the surmise or deduction of underlying attitudes and agendas that may have influenced the real people involved, but which cannot be independently authenticated, renders what is written ‘fiction’ rather than ‘fact.’ His concern appears to be that history is often treated as ‘gospel’ and that historiography is either blind to, or ignores the significance of, this. This criticism of the writing and reading of history is important in considering the use of historical materials as resources for theological reflection.

Locating My Research within the Discipline of History

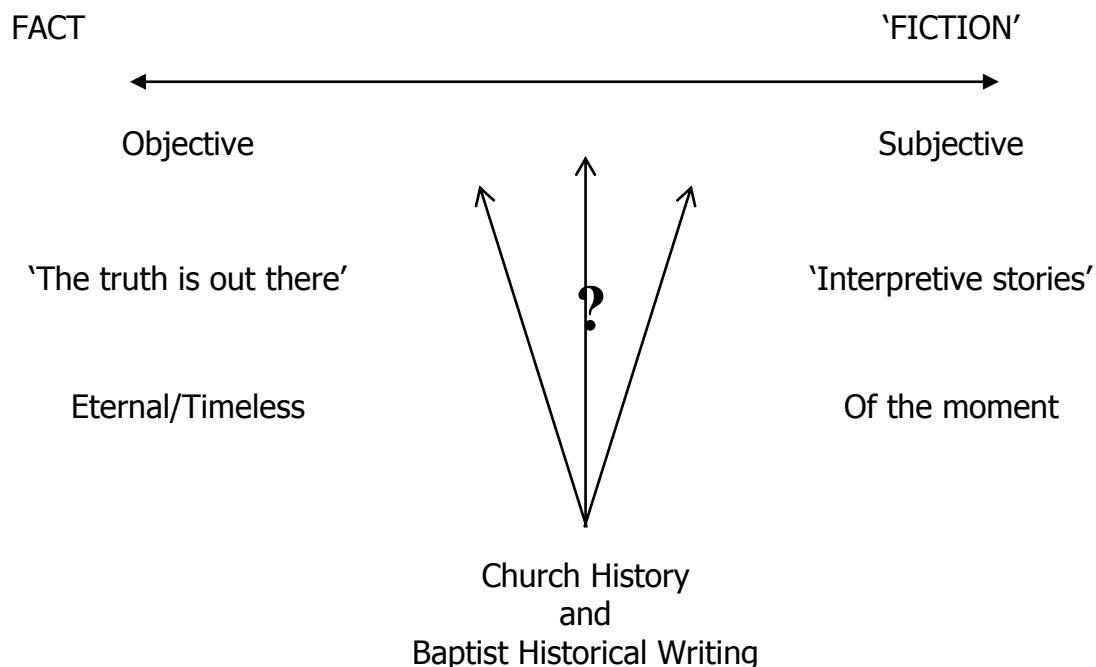
History has been subject to many changes and influences since the Enlightenment.

At the start of the twenty-first century there is no longer one (western) understanding of what history is or does. There continue to be national (or multi-national) histories, economic histories and social histories. Oral histories take their place alongside mighty tomes, and the role of the amateur as well as the professional

¹⁰⁷ Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*. (p. 119)

historian is recognised. Whilst some historians remain committed to the ideal of objectivity, others have abandoned it totally, seeing all historical writing as a literary construct influenced by politics.

I believe it is possible to express this as a spectrum similar to that used for congregational studies, and to ask questions of where Church History, and specifically Baptist historical materials, might be located within this. It also allows me to locate myself as a researcher and reader of history.



Whilst it is clearly inadequate to approach historical resources as value-free, purely factual and with a timeless meaning, I remain convinced that studying the past is worthwhile. Writers such as Iggers and Appleby remain firmly committed to work within the discipline of history, accepting, and often endorsing, the critiques that emerge from alternative perspectives as a necessary corrective to what has gone before. That the voices of 'little people' are heard, that it is no longer accepted that the driving factor is self evidently 'the economy' or 'the frontier,' that meaning is

contextual, partial and particular, that all writers have agendas and pressures – all these provide important checks and balances. However, the ‘scientific method’ too has its strengths. Being traceable and documented it is possible to deduce what has informed an understanding. Similarly, the place of peer review, seminar, conference and journal as forums for debate is undisputed. Far from seeing recent developments and critiques as signalling the end of history they have made it more sophisticated and diverse. A chastened and humbled discipline may no longer preach ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’ but can with confidence espouse ‘plausibility.’ It is in this mid-range that I would like to locate myself, as a critical reader and interpreter of history, and specifically Baptist historical resources.

The Third 'Corner': Church History

Having explored the development of history, at least within the Western world and during the twentieth century, it is necessary to return to my target field of enquiry, and the third ‘corner’ of my ‘jigsaw’, namely Church History, and specifically Baptist historical writing. Drawing on work by church historian Euan Cameron¹⁰⁸ and theologian Rowan Williams,¹⁰⁹ I consider necessarily briefly the field of Church History before considering contemporary Baptist historical writing.

In the introduction to his book *Why Study the Past*, Williams identifies three important points about history and the church:

- (i) ‘[H]istory is a set of stories we tell in order to understand better who we are and the world we’re in’,¹¹⁰
- (ii) ‘The Church ... [is] the new human race in embryo ... the challenge is to trace the way in which the Church has demonstrated its divine origin’,¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ E. Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

¹⁰⁹ Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*.

¹¹⁰ ———, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 1

- (iii) Christians study ‘history for what feeds and nourishes belief now ... [expecting to] emerge with some greater fullness of Christian maturity’,¹¹²

Observing that ‘good theology does not come from bad history’,¹¹³ Williams emphasises the distinctive nature of history written by Christians about Christians, which is – or should be – inextricably linked to faith. Writing and reading Church History becomes a moral undertaking, affirming my view that historical resources potentially offer valuable insights for theological reflection.

Cameron observes that within Church History ‘the elements of continuity and change are always intertwined’,¹¹⁴ a view echoed by Williams:

‘Christians from the beginning have a strong investment in history as a discipline that seeks to hold together in one story continuity and discontinuity’,¹¹⁵

Again, this resonates with my work, which seeks to find resources for reflecting on change.

Both writers outline the development of Church History citing similar examples – from the early work of Eusebius, Augustine and Bede, through Luther, Calvin and Foxe to Ranke, Mosheim and von Harnack. It is significant that the majority of this writing occurred during periods of uncertainty, persecution or transition: one of the key motivators for thinking about, and writing, history has been change, often linked to a quest for certainty, identity or authenticity.

¹¹¹ ———, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 2

¹¹² ———, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 3

¹¹³ ———, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 2

¹¹⁴ Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches Past*. p. 100

¹¹⁵ Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 8

However, during the twentieth century separation of history and theology occurred:

‘Because of the secularization (Post-Ranke) and the specialization and compartmentalization of the profession of Church History, historians have generally ceased to ask what their work has to say about theological questions.’¹¹⁶

Cameron identifies two responses to this separation of theology and history. The first, a ‘relativist’ approach, often employed by secular historians, sees the church continually adapting itself, with little unchanging ‘essence’ beyond ritual, symbol and text. Such approaches offer valuable insights both into how the church is changed by society and, importantly, how it influences society, but do not address theological questions. Essentialist approaches are, in Cameron’s view,¹¹⁷ the only option for a practising Christian. Such views assume that there is an unchanging ‘essence’ of Christianity – though he concedes, after lengthy discussion, that defining this ‘essence’ may never be unachievable since all understandings are partial. Whilst sharing Cameron’s view that faith should inform the Christian writing of history, I am not convinced that, at least explicitly, it is inevitable.

Theologians have been influenced by similar factors to their ‘secular’ counterparts – theologies of liberation, gendered perspectives and revisionist writings (notably in respect of missionary organisations), parallel secular developments in history, but have they been reflected in Church History and more specifically in Baptist historical writing?

¹¹⁶ Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches Past*. p. 162

¹¹⁷ ———, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches Past*. pp. 230 and 236 (in negative)

Baptist History

In partial response to this question, I present an overview of Baptist history written by and for Baptists since the mid twentieth century. It is not exhaustive, and the detailed content of the works is not described; rather attention focuses on the style, or approach, of the publications. Several key publishers, with different target audiences, have been identified, and works are grouped accordingly.

The Baptist Union of Great Britain currently sells two historical works produced under its auspices, Ernest Payne's *The Baptist Union: A Short History*¹¹⁸ and Roger Hayden's *English Baptist History and Heritage* (2nd edition).¹¹⁹

Payne's work, prepared to anticipate the ter-jubilee celebrations of the Baptist Union provides a systematic, chronological account. The book was reprinted twice, suggesting it was, in its day, very popular. It is rich in detail, citing countless names and places, and covers diverse issues from slavery to the Downgrade controversy before ending with issues that needed to be addressed and a telling quotation on Church History:

‘It is only when we see the Church’s life as one great stream of supernatural vitality, flowing down through the centuries and manifesting itself in a bewildering variety of modes and patterns, that we shall be in a position to approach the Church’s history in other than an antiquarian spirit and, in humility and charity, to praise our fathers who begat us, while we try to do for our age what they tried to do for theirs.’¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History* (London: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1958).

¹¹⁹ R. Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage*, Second ed. (Oxford: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2005).

¹²⁰ E L Mascal *The Recovery of Unity: A Theological Approach*, 1958, page 66 cited in Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History*. p. 255

Very different in style and purpose, Hayden's work was first published in 1990 as 'the basic text book for those preparing to take the BU exams in Baptist History and Baptist Principles.'¹²¹ The style is non-academic and the book is extensively illustrated with photographs and cartoons. Numerous 'to think about' boxes, invite the reader to relate what has been read to their own context – a healthy, if simplistic, connection of past and present. The second edition¹²² is essentially a new book. Significantly longer and without cartoons or 'to think about' boxes, its style is considerably more formal, with an academic layout. Whilst the author acknowledges that 'my own perceptions have undoubtedly shaped the final part of this book'¹²³ I would argue that this must be true of the whole work. Extensive use is made of secondary texts and PhD theses but there is little evidence that original early documents have been consulted.

Overtly more scholarly, the Baptist Historical Society aims

'... to help British Baptists understand their heritage and history. We provide an appropriate academic opportunity for those who wish to study life of Baptist churches, people and ideas, so that Baptists can "articulate and discover the faith by which we all live".'¹²⁴

This is reflected in the *English Baptists* series of books, which provides in-depth descriptions of the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, drawing extensively on original materials.

¹²¹ R. Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage* (Oxford: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1990),. preface

¹²² Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage*.

¹²³ ———, *English Baptist History and Heritage*. p. x

¹²⁴ <http://www.baptisthistory.org.uk> accessed 9th June 2007

B R White's 17th Century volume, published in 1983,¹²⁵ was revised and reissued in 1996¹²⁶. Parallel descriptions of the emergence of the General and Particular Baptists are provided before the persecution faced by both groups is discussed (c.f. Hayden¹²⁷ who includes persecution only within his description of the Particular Baptists). The major change in the second edition is an additional chapter on women's experiences, focussing on marriage, ministry and spirituality.

Raymond Brown's 18th Century account continues the parallel stories of General and Particular Baptists, but, after an introductory chapter, is divided into three sections entitled 'Freedom 1689 – 1730', 'Tensions 1730 – 1770' and 'Expansion 1770 – 1815',¹²⁸ reflecting the trajectory he identifies and explores.

Considerably larger than the previous volumes, John Briggs' 19th Century analysis¹²⁹ adopts an approach designed to 'eschew a discussion framed around successive periods of innovation, stability, progress and decline, and instead pursue ten analytical focuses',¹³⁰ of

- (i) Congregational life and worship
- (ii) Baptism and communion
- (iii) Ministry and ministerial training
- (iv) General and Particular
- (v) Faith and Thought
- (vi) Associations, Alliances and the Wider Church

¹²⁵ White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*

¹²⁶ ———, *The English Baptists of the 17th Century*.

¹²⁷ Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage*. Chapter 7

¹²⁸ Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*. Contents page

¹²⁹ Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*.

¹³⁰ ———, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*. p. 11

- (vii) Number, Class and Gender
- (viii) Mission and Evangelism
- (ix) Baptists and Education
- (x) Society and Politics

This approach allows in-depth engagement with major themes, but is inevitably selective – what has been omitted, deliberately or otherwise?

The final volume, by Ian Randall¹³¹ adopts a decade-by-decade approach to the 20th century drawing out key themes from the plethora of extant information. Like Payne¹³², Randall has the task of summing up the status quo and pointing to the future. Noting how easy it is to ‘look back on the twentieth century and focus on the dismal features in Baptist life’¹³³ he closes by referring to ‘more hopeful indicators ... towards the end of the century... underlying [which]... was an openness to rejuvenating change.’¹³⁴ This final emphasis both highlights the importance of change and connects reflecting on the past with shaping the future.

The Baptist Historical Society publishes a journal, *Baptist Quarterly*, containing both historical and theological articles on diverse aspects of interest to Baptists, from biographies and church histories to analyses of past and present theological debates, as well as numerous works, some only available privately, on aspects of Baptist history and theology. It also collates and makes available selected Association records and Church books.

¹³¹ I. M. Randall, *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century* (Didcot, Oxfordshire: The Baptist Historical Society, 2005).

¹³² Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History*.

¹³³ Randall, *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century*. p. 533

¹³⁴ ———, *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century*.

The Paternoster *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* series embraces both theology and history and represents the worldwide diversity of Baptist experience.

‘The series editors and consultants believe that the academic disciplines of history and theology are of vital importance to the spiritual vitality of the churches of the Baptist faith and order. The series sets out to discuss, examine and explore the many dimensions of their tradition and so to contribute to their on-going intellectual vigour.’¹³⁵

The writers are predominantly respected Baptist theologians and historians, resulting in well-researched, rigorous analyses of complex topics. Whilst there are several books on English Baptist experience, of particular importance for my work is *Recycling the Past or Researching History*¹³⁶ a series of essays challenging Baptist myths and exploring neglected topics. In the introduction, subtitled ‘Caring for Baptist Memory’ the editors observe that ‘[n]ot knowing what rightfully belongs to our heritage, we are inadvertently and recklessly discarding some priceless heirlooms.’¹³⁷ As well as a number of revisionist accounts, an essay by Philip Thompson explicitly explores the Baptist myth of ‘changelessness’ noting how context and tradition do, in fact, shape practice.

The Whitely lectureship, established in honour of W T Whitley, a Baptist historian, whose important *History of British Baptists*¹³⁸ was published in 1923, is explicitly concerned with publishing work of Baptist scholars, and includes some historical work, notably Ruth Gouldbourne’s paper on women and ministry¹³⁹. Other lectures

¹³⁵ Authentic Media website, Paternoster page, http://www.authenticmedia.co.uk/AuthenticSite/category/theology_monographs_studies+in+baptist+history+and+thought/ accessed 7th June 2007

¹³⁶ Thompson and Cross, *Recycling the Past or Researching History*. p. xviii, citing E. H. Ohlmann, "The Essence

of the Baptists: A Reexamination," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 13, no. 4 (1986).

¹³⁸ W. T. Whitley, *History of British Baptists* (London: C Griffin and Co., 1923).

¹³⁹ R. Gouldbourne, *Reinventing the Wheel: Women and Ministry in English Baptist Life* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1998).

include explicit historical references, e.g. to the experience of children,¹⁴⁰ renewal¹⁴¹ and hermeneutics.¹⁴² Whilst the use of historical materials in the essays is largely uncritical, it hints that I may not be alone in seeing historical materials as a resource to assist in reflection on contemporary issues.

Whilst the publications outlined above probably have the highest ‘status’ of works on English Baptist history, there are numerous other publications, e.g. doctoral theses¹⁴³, North American works¹⁴⁴ and books by British Baptists outwith the Baptist Union¹⁴⁵. Such works offer additional, and sometimes complimentary, insights to those from more widely recognised publications.

Finally there are the congregational histories, usually written by enthusiastic members of local churches who may have no training in history or theology. Often prepared to celebrate significant anniversaries and with a limited circulation, the focus tends to be on perceived successes, with key persons and dates dominating the account and little or no reflection on issues or theology.¹⁴⁶ The resultant publications

¹⁴⁰ A. Dunkley, *Seen and Heard: Reflections on Children and Baptist Tradition* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2000).

¹⁴¹ S. R. Holmes, *Tradition and Renewal in Baptist Life* (Oxford: Whitley Lecture, 2003).

¹⁴² S. F. Winter, *More Light and Truth? Biblical Interpretation in Covenantal Perspective* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2007).

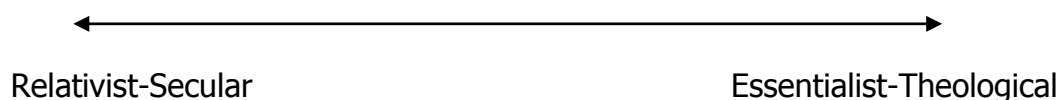
¹⁴³ For example: F. Rinaldi, "The Tribe of Dan: The New Connexion of General Baptists 1770 - 1891" (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 1995), S. Wright, *The Early English Baptists 1603 - 1649* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006).

¹⁴⁴ For example M. A. G. Haykin, *Rediscovering Our English Baptist Heritage: Kiffin, Knollys and Keach* (Leeds: Reformation Today Trust, 1996).

¹⁴⁵ For Example R. W. Oliver, *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists 1771 - 1892* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006).

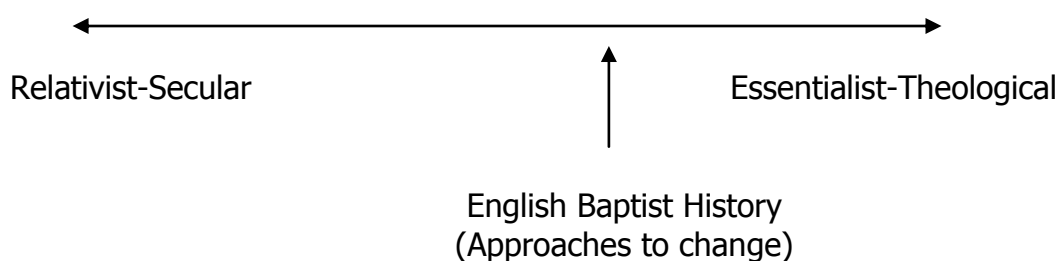
¹⁴⁶ For example, the eight-page A5 history of my own congregation was prepared as part of its bicentenary celebrations. It consists largely of dates and names, centring on key families (I would argue it is what Becker terms a ‘Family’ congregation), the choir and a Victorian philanthropist hymn-writer; there is no mention of the numerous issues (some characterised by conflict) that have influenced the church especially during the last half-century and the only theological reference is an appeal for personal Bible study and prayer.

If Cameron's distinctions¹⁴⁹ are used as extremes, another spectrum of approaches can be constructed:



If Cameron is right, as a practising Christian, my work has to be 'essentialist.'

Whilst there is a definite theological aspect to my work and, with Williams¹⁵⁰, I assert the importance of recognising the supernatural element in Christian history, I am not examining fundamental doctrines. Therefore my work cannot be located at an 'essentialist' extreme. By contrast, although I am seeking general principles which, like other Church Health work, draw from 'secular' sources, the theological aspect prevents its location at the 'relativist' extreme. Once again, I identify my work as mid-range:



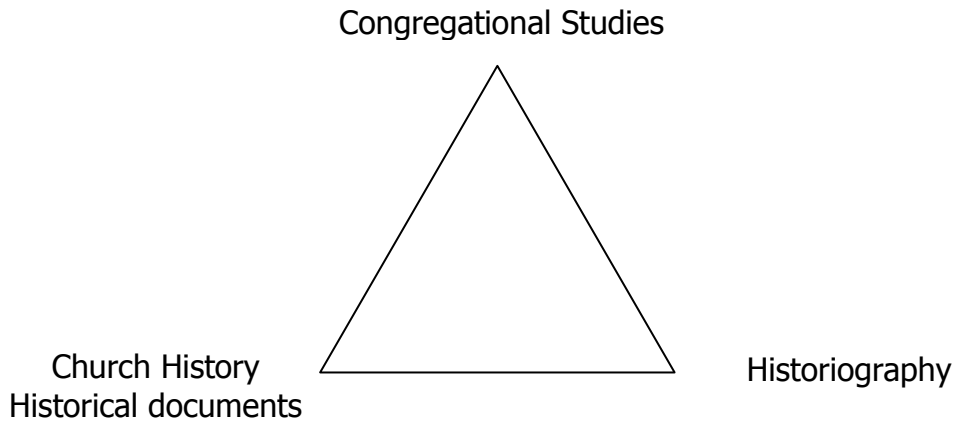
Putting it Together: The Edge of a Jigsaw

The purpose of the work presented in this chapter has been to establish an academic framework for my research. Essential to this is its location within Practical Theology, and specifically Congregational Studies. However, since I am interested in the potential for employing historical resources it has also been necessary to gain an understanding of developments in the academic discipline of history that impact

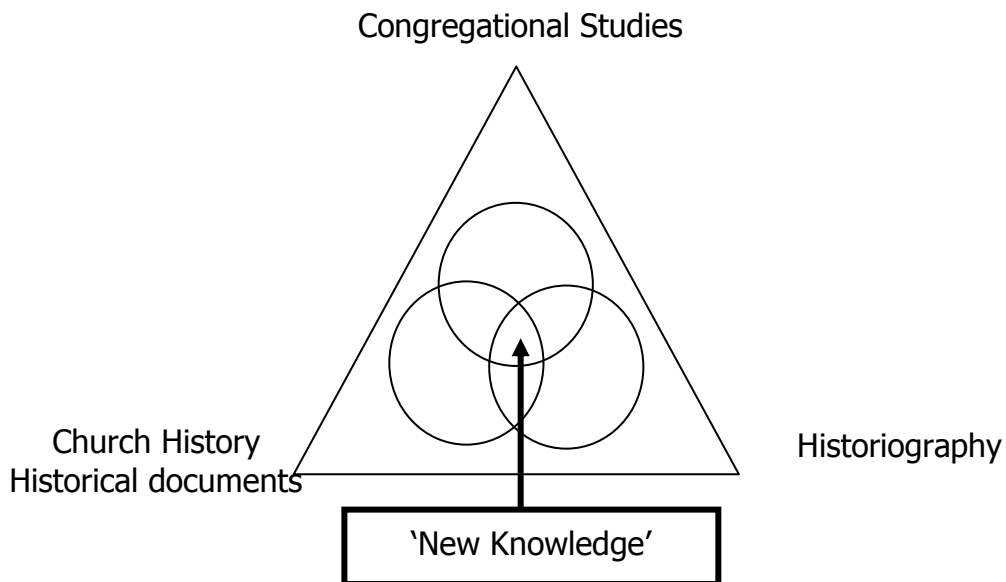
¹⁴⁹ Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches Past*. p. 230

¹⁵⁰ Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. pp. 7-9

the writing, and reading, of history – what is often termed historiography. Finally, it has been necessary to explore the field of Church History and specifically the range of Baptist history writing. These three areas form the ‘corners’ of my academic jigsaw.



Having defined the corners, it is necessary to begin to discern how they relate to one another, and how the project as a whole has the potential to generate new knowledge, as illustrated overleaf:



The review of the field of Congregational Studies clearly locates my research in the extrinsic area of Church Health, with important insights to be drawn from intrinsic studies, specifically those employing literary theory and narrative approaches.

The key voices in Church Health almost all come from North America, and the limited UK work draws heavily on their findings. The *Handbook for Congregational Studies*¹⁵¹ and its derivatives recognise to some extent the importance of history in shaping and informing self-understanding. The collection of focussed oral histories and construction of timelines are practical means by which a congregation can express this. Whilst valuable insights are obtained from these exercises,¹⁵² they are inherently partial and uncritical. There is no sense that the emerging history is examined, rather it is accepted at face value, potentially perpetuating understandings that are both factually inaccurate and strongly influenced by powerful voices. Whilst such histories are valuable at a local level, a more rigorous approach is needed if insights are to be more generally applicable. Philip Richter¹⁵³ bemoans the paucity of denominational studies at the start of his essay on denominational culture. Recognising the ambivalence of a post-Christian society, he observes the importance of denominational culture – and implicitly history – in shaping experience. In my view it is ignorance of these features that create the tensions he observes. There is clearly a place for more work on this area, and I would suggest tentatively that the widespread distinction between ‘congregational’ and ‘denominational’ history is over-emphasised, since much primary material relates to distinct congregations¹⁵⁴.

In my view, the Church Health approach to history is simplistic and uncritical.

History is, as Keith Jenkins observes a ‘shifting, problematic discourse ... produced

¹⁵¹ Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*.

¹⁵² I acknowledge additional insights on the nature and value of oral histories gained from review German social history, p 37 above

¹⁵³ Richter, "Denominational Cultures: The Cinderella of Congregational Studies."

¹⁵⁴ Unpublished work I have undertaken on Baptist hymn-singing debate and Baptist endogamy in 17th Century revealed arguments extrapolated, sometimes incorrectly, from scant extant primary material.

by a group of present-minded workers...'¹⁵⁵ – during the last century it has been subject to diverse influences and has become critically self-aware, as the emergent concept of historiography, the study of the writing of history, indicates. It is no longer acceptable for a Christian or Church Historian to read or write history without awareness of inherent interpretive factors such as worldview, trajectory and purpose. As Williams observes, it is necessary to problematise, to 'make strange'¹⁵⁶, what is read in order to learn from it:

'We need to read our records with vastly increased care and discernment; we need to be able to recognise ... what has been forgotten or distorted later in the story.'¹⁵⁷

The rethinking of narrative (Stone¹⁵⁸, White¹⁵⁹ and others) clearly parallels, and indeed informs, Hopewell's work in Congregational Studies, illustrating further the importance of connecting the two fields.

Church History is a field shared by professional and amateur writers, and undertaken both within and outwith a Christian worldview. Cameron¹⁶⁰ draws a distinction between secular, relativist work and that undertaken by Christians, which must, he argues, be essentialist. Both approaches are valuable, but their aims differ, and critical awareness is needed in reading to discern the influencing factors.

Baptist history is essentially a subset of Church History and a wide range of publications exists, many of which have a sense of official status, being produced by

¹⁵⁵ K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991). p. 26

¹⁵⁶ Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 20

¹⁵⁷ ———, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 20

¹⁵⁸ ———, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*, Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History."

¹⁵⁹ White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*.

¹⁶⁰ Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches Past*.

the Baptist Union or the Baptist Historical Society. Such works, inevitably shaped by the constraints of their sponsors, primarily consist of chronological accounts leading to the present day – and to an extent echo the style of national histories.¹⁶¹ More recent work, notably that published by Paternoster, challenges some of the assumptions and includes revisionist histories and explorations of previously unheard voices. There is a sense that Baptist historians, many of whom are professionally trained, are beginning to take a more critical approach. In relation to my work, my main criticism is that most of the writing centres on ‘who, what and when’ rather than ‘why or how’ – there seems to be a gap to be explored.

The final word must go to Rowan Williams who explicitly connects Church History to Church Health:

‘Christian history is part of modernity’s buried and frequently denied biography. To disinter some of this biography is not only something that makes for *the health of the church*; it is a seriously needed contribution to the intellectual and emotional well-being of culture.’¹⁶² (Emphasis mine)

The literature review undertaken has sought to locate my research at the interface of three fields, Church Health, History (Historiography) and Church History, and I believe it has succeeded. Church Health can include a historical dimension, but is largely uncritical. Church History, and specifically Baptist History, has tended to consist of chronological accounts and major doctrinal issues with little or no consideration of *process*. Historiography calls into question any naïve reading of history and offers valuable insights on more critical approaches.

¹⁶¹ See discussion on nationhood, pp 34 - 35 above

¹⁶² Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 113

I began with two questions, and these are now briefly considered. Firstly a generic question: can historical resources be employed within the process of theological reflection? I believe the answer to this question is 'yes' but that the literature review has highlighted the dangers of treating this naively. Further questions about the nature and status of such resources arise from a better appreciation of historiography. If histories are as much 'created' as 'discovered' then caution is needed in selecting material, with primary sources less prone to layers of interpretation. Likewise, without denying the worth of oral histories, care is needed both in collecting and employing such data. Finally, the 'status' of historical resources refers not only to their genre or their 'pedigree' but also to their perceived authority, e.g. in a hierarchy such 'scripture, tradition, reason and experience'¹⁶³ where are historical resources to be located? Further work will be required to explore these issues.

My second question was specific: can Baptists handle change better? This can form a focus for exploring the generic question by examining Baptist historical resources to seek evidence of approaches used by past generations facing actual or potential change. I assert that the traditional Church Histories with their focus on chronology and/or doctrine are of limited value in this respect. Rather, learning from the developments in historiography, I believe that I will need to revisit original texts with a clear, and self aware, aim of seeking evidence of *process*. It is my hope that it will prove possible to extrapolate intelligently from the particular examples selected to a wider Baptist context and even, more tentatively, into the generic field of Church Health.

¹⁶³ E.g. as in the Wesleyan quadrilateral

Having completed the literature review I remain convinced that 'to engage with the Church's past is to see something of the Church's future'¹⁶⁴ and that my work can provide a new and useful contribution to the field.

¹⁶⁴ Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 94

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Excursus – A Pastoral Cycle – Towards a Publishable Article

Experience

The literature review confirmed my opinion that there was a role for employing denominational history within Practical Theology, notably in the strand of Church Health. By surveying the wide-ranging developments in historical methods and writing during the twentieth century, it became evident that many alternatives to the 'progress model' – the inevitable rise and success of a particular movement – were available.

Supervisors' comments on the work noted, rightly, that the section on Baptist history was the least developed, being essentially a survey of works rather than a critical engagement with them. In selecting a topic to explore for the publishable article this was clearly an area worthy of further exploration and more rigorous critique.

Analysis/Exploration

In reflecting on work presented in the literature review relating Baptist history, I realised that an important question to ask is "what is it that the writers perceive themselves to be doing?" For what purpose, and for what audience(s) do they write? Specifically I was interested in seeking to ascertain what Baptists who write history saw as their purpose and how this might impact what is read, by whom or for what purpose. In order to achieve this, a systematic review was made of the journal of the Baptist Historical Society (BHS), the *Baptist Quarterly (BQ)*, covering all editions from its inception to spring 2008, a period of roughly 80 years. This undertaking coincided with the centenary of the organisation (which significantly predates its publications) and offered a valuable focus for the paper, which could be offered as part the centenary conference held in 2008.

Reflection

The close study of *BQ* revealed that at its outset the BHS, or at least its founder, had a clear vision for the organisation and for denominational history as ‘a picture of real life, with men and women acting under the stress of living convictions’¹⁶⁵ The article that emerged sought to explore how such a vision might be re-imagined for the twenty-first century taking into account insights from the literature review and other, subsequent reading on historical method and the relationship between theology and history. The paper was presented at the BHS centenary conference in Prague in July 2008; and is due to be published as a chapter in the book form of the proceedings of that conference during 2011. A derivative paper, exploring how ministerial students might be encouraged to engage more creatively with historical resources was presented at the Baptists Doing Theology conference held in Manchester in August 2008. Chapter 3 of this submission is the paper as it was presented in Prague, hence the style differs from the more formal language of the literature review in Chapter 2

Action/Response

The paper presented at the BHS centenary conference was well received and subsequently its content discussed by that organisation. From the perspective of my own research, issues identified in the paper formed an important input to developing the subsequent research proposal.

¹⁶⁵ H. W. Robinson, "The Value of Denominational History," *The Baptist Quarterly* 2 (1924-1925). p. 101

Chapter 3 – Publishable Article

This chapter presents a publishable undertaken as part of my research project and initially submitted in 2008 under the auspices of the DPT programme within the University of Manchester.

Renewing the Vision - History for the Health of the Church

Presented at The Baptist Historical Society Centenary Conference, Prague, 16 – 19 July 2008

Why study the past? What is the purpose of Church history in general and denominational history in particular? I believe that these questions, if seldom articulated, are important both for those who research and write denominational history, and for those who read and reflect upon it. From professional historian to enthusiastic layperson, ministerial student to academic theologian, the answers to these questions will inform attitudes to, and engagement with, this incredibly rich resource. It is my belief that Baptist denominational history has the potential to contribute greatly within the field of practical theology, specifically that often termed ‘church health.’ However, to date, my experience suggests that this potential is unrealised, in part at least because the readily available historical publications are not intended for such use. In this paper, after briefly summarising the basis for my own interest in this field, I explore how the vision for the *Baptist Quarterly*, identified at its launch by H Wheeler Robinson, may be creatively renewed, specifically in respect to its potential role within the area of church health. Beginning with an overview of the current scope of Baptist historical writing, my exploration considers a number of interconnected avenues relating both to practical theology and to aspects of contemporary historiography before offering a renewed version of the Wheeler Robinson vision.

Reading and Reflecting with Baptist History – My Story

I consider that it is important to begin this paper by providing some background to my own experience of reading Baptist history, and why I believe this avenue of exploration is valid and important. Two key factors are identified. Firstly, I am trained, and approach the topic, as a practical theologian; one of the central tenets of practical theology is the role of experience in prompting and informing theological reflection – if nothing else, this section provides a context for my exploration. Secondly, in common with many Baptist ministers I have no training as an historian, and, until required so to do by the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) had read almost no history since leaving school – something that inevitably results in preconceptions, assumptions and ignorance that affect engagement with the subject. Each of these factors influences my work, and informs its direction and outcome.

My first significant engagement with Baptist denominational history was the requirement to study ‘Baptist History and Principles’ as part of my ministerial training, a requirement fulfilled by the production of one 3,000-word essay on Baptist principles and two 1500-word essays on historical topics selected from a prescribed list. Alongside this was a series of classes under the banner ‘understanding our tradition’ part of which was an overview, trajectory-based account of Baptist origins and emergence. One of the luxuries of training in an ecumenical context was the opportunity to learn something of the historical origins and central principles of other traditions, which provided useful touchstones for identifying and appreciating that which is distinctively Baptist, but there was little reflection on, or critical engagement with, the material presented.

The purpose of the required essays is generally regarded as a means of enabling students to develop their understanding of Baptist tradition in order that they are better equipped to serve BUGB churches¹⁶⁶. However, in my experience, most students either endeavoured to complete their essays as early as possible or delayed them until further avoidance became impossible, as they found the material less engaging or less immediately relevant than other subjects on offer. As I experienced it, the majority of input on history was didactic – dates, names and places; whilst it provided ‘head knowledge,’ notably an overview of the emergence of the movement from Smyth and Helwys to the establishment of BUGB, it did not engender any ‘heart knowledge,’ that this is part of who I am. Whilst valuable as background, the relevance of the subject for ministry or mission was not evident.

My interest in Baptist denominational history, and appreciation of its incredible potential, emerged when I began to seek resources to help me reflect on Baptist congregations embroiled in (often destructive) conflict and how management of that might be improved. Whilst contemporary practical guidebooks and techniques were useful in dealing with the immediate situation, I was more interested in exploring generic questions of congregations approaching the potential for change. A suggestion that examining bygone controversies might prove useful led to discovery (recovery?) of some 17th century debates on pastoral issues, the records of which allowed me to postulate processes, theological and pastoral, that may have been employed. I began to see the potential of the resource and, in a new way, this became part of my story – and I part of the bigger story of Baptists endeavouring to manage change. The stories of seventeenth century men (the writers were all male),

¹⁶⁶ For example, personal communication from P. Goodliff, email, 8 Jan 2008.

passionate about their faith and seeking to live authentic Christian lives affirmed the theological aspect of what I was doing and offered hints for present day practice. I began to appreciate the enormous potential of this resource – and to realise that it remains largely unused. Questions about the accessibility of the material and how it might inform theological reflection on issues of change to promote more healthy congregations led me to the research topic of which the work presented in this paper is the start. Since the majority of published Baptist history is researched and written by the Baptist Historical Society (BHS), it is appropriate, as it celebrates its centenary, that its potential to inform theological reflection in this way is explored carefully. It is my belief that, from its earliest days, this potential was implicit in the vision for the society, and that this vision can be creatively renewed for a new century by embracing insights from twentieth century developments in both historiography and practical theology. Before these developments are considered, however, attention turns to describing that initial vision.

Establishing a Vision for the Baptist Historical Society

Writing in the first issue of the *Baptist Quarterly*, Henry Wheeler Robinson clearly had a vision for the organisation, and specifically its new journal, which he saw as ‘a natural development of the past, not [-] a break with it.’¹⁶⁷ The new journal aimed to appeal to ‘all who cherish Baptist convictions, and are prepared to love the past for the sake of the present.’¹⁶⁸ He saw ‘no incongruity in mingling the study of the past with the interests of the present,’ stressing ‘the essence of its relation to life...’¹⁶⁹ A year later, discussing the value of denominational history, he realistically observed that ‘... a Society for the study of denominational history is apt to become a

¹⁶⁷ H. W. Robinson, "The Aims of 'the Baptist Quarterly'," *The Baptist Quarterly* 1 (1922-1923). p. 1

¹⁶⁸ Robinson, "The Aims of 'the Baptist Quarterly'." p. 1

¹⁶⁹ ———, "The Aims of 'the Baptist Quarterly'." p. 2

Cinderella without Cinderella's good fortune,¹⁷⁰ asking, with clear insight, how much this was due to 'our failure to present more clearly the practical values and present interests of the study of our past.'¹⁷¹ Almost a century later, these words have a somewhat prophetic ring, as the BHS remains a relatively small organisation and Baptist history appears often to be neglected or ignored beyond those seeking to satisfy the BUGB requirements for accreditation as lay preachers and ministers.

Wheeler Robinson insightfully identified potential gains of good denominational history, offering 'a picture of real life, with men and women acting under the stress of living convictions'¹⁷², 'enabling us to discriminate between the transient and the permanent,'¹⁷³ and 'the perennial conflict between organization and spirit.'¹⁷⁴

Finally he stated '... a justification for the study of denominational history which goes deepest of all... [it] shows us what human nature is, by showing its actions and reactions under the power of great emotions and intense convictions.'¹⁷⁵ In these lofty aims are important glimpses of an interest in what is today termed practical theology: Wheeler Robinson was proposing that insights from history could be related to questions and issues facing Baptists in his own day. Whilst the potential for creative engagement with denominational history extends far more widely, I see in the Wheeler Robinson vision glimpses of my own interest in its promise as a resource for church health. It is this perspective that informs my paper in exploring how the vision can be renewed for a new century.

¹⁷⁰ ———, "The Value of Denominational History." p. 100

¹⁷¹ ———, "The Value of Denominational History." p. 100

¹⁷² ———, "The Value of Denominational History." p. 101

¹⁷³ ———, "The Value of Denominational History." p. 104

¹⁷⁴ ———, "The Value of Denominational History." p. 106

¹⁷⁵ ———, "The Value of Denominational History." p. 109

So far in Wheeler Robinson I find a good ally for my assertions, however, he also states that denominational history ‘does not usually make striking contributions to theology, for theology as a science will ignore all denominational barriers.’¹⁷⁶ In terms of systematic theology or within his speciality of Biblical studies, this assertion is undoubtedly valid. However, practical theology, with its ready embrace of inter-disciplinary approaches, is an area in which I believe denominational history could offer something significant. Firstly, practical theology explicitly acknowledges the inherent worth of ‘small scale’ theologies as a contribution to a wider field. Secondly, from very specific examples, general principles can be deduced which *are* more widely applicable – within or across denominations. Far from being a somewhat esoteric distraction, the ongoing story of God’s people is a vital (lively and essential) contribution to theology, and it is this that allows the vision that the BHS – and specifically Wheeler Robinson – embraced to be renewed creatively for a new century. However, if history *is* to be employed for the health of the church, and the vision helpfully renewed, then attention must be given to exploring in greater detail how that may be achieved: this paper contributes to that undertaking.

For the Health of the Church...

It *is* my belief that Christian historical materials¹⁷⁷ form a valuable, and largely neglected, resource, which have the potential to inform contemporary theological reflection on issues affecting church health, not merely in the present but also in looking to the future. These are sentiments I find echoed both by Rowan Williams who observes that ‘[t]o engage with the Church’s past is to see something of the

¹⁷⁶ _____, "The Value of Denominational History." p. 109

¹⁷⁷ I use the term ‘materials’ as shorthand, albeit somewhat clumsy, for texts (primary and secondary), oral histories, artefacts etc that contribute to our ‘history.’

Church's future'¹⁷⁸ which 'makes for the health of the church...'¹⁷⁹ and by Baptist historian Barrie White, that, as Baptists, 'knowledge of [our] past will inform the decisions [we] take today which will shape [our] tomorrow.'¹⁸⁰ Before considering issues relating to historiography, it is vital that the interface with practical theology is explored and its embrace (or otherwise) of historical materials identified.

Church health is an extensive and diverse area of practical theology that concerns itself specifically, though not exclusively, with congregational self-understanding aimed at positive transformation. Prompted by actual or perceived change, the need to resolve internal issues, or to respond to external events, congregations employ a range of resources and techniques to assist them both in thinking about their present and in the formulation of options for their future. Whilst there are numerous guidebooks available to churches wishing to address specific topics and issues, such as e.g. conflict resolution or more effective meetings,¹⁸¹ the majority of academic (as well as grass roots) work in this area has its origins in the USA, and specifically by a consortium of writers within the field of congregational studies.¹⁸²

The earliest of these works, the *Handbook for Congregational Studies*¹⁸³ provided a groundbreaking, practical approach central to which was the identification and

¹⁷⁸ Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 94

¹⁷⁹ ———, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 113

¹⁸⁰ White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* p. 6

¹⁸¹ Current examples in use amongst BUGB churches include *Fit4life Manual*, (Hawthorn, Victoria: Baptist Union of Victoria, 2004), Lassetter and Whalley, *Journeying through Conflict*, Warren, *The Healthy Churches Handbook*. Another popular source of practical resources is the USA based Alban Institute, a current list of whose publications may be found at <http://www.alban.org>

¹⁸² For example Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*, Dudley and Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing and Adapting in Changing Communities*, C. S. Dudley et al., *Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies* (Westminster John Knox, 1991).

¹⁸³ Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*.

understanding of a congregation's 'identity.' Significantly, a congregation's history and heritage were perceived as important aspects of its identity alongside demography, worldview, symbols and rituals, i.e. that our history is part of *who* we are. There is a clear sense of being part of an ongoing story: in some way past, present and future are connected. The *Handbook* advocated two approaches to employing history, firstly, the collection of oral history, as remembered by a selection of congregation members, and, secondly, the production of a large scale visual timeline, a more wide ranging exercise, designed to include significant congregational, local, national and global events.

Since the publication of the *Handbook*, the ideas it contains have been subject to ongoing review, during which the fortunes of the historical aspect have been varied. Notably, and regrettably, it has been relegated to part of the 'context' or background¹⁸⁴ - *where* we are rather than *who* we are. Despite this lamentable change of emphasis, the import of 'history as a resource for change, to explore... [the] past and weave these facts, events and stories together to explain the present and open new options for the future'¹⁸⁵ continues to be recognised and affirmed, and for that, at least, I am grateful.¹⁸⁶

It is very easy to be critical of an approach to history employing congregationally generated time lines and oral recollections: the potential for individuals to be eulogised or demonised, painful memories excised or exaggerated, or important moments inadvertently overlooked is self-evident. Similarly, there may be little

¹⁸⁴ Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*.

¹⁸⁵ Dudley and Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing and Adapting in Changing Communities*.

¹⁸⁶ The Handbook and its successors are all the work of North Americans, a greater sadness is that in most British writing on Church Health history is barely, if at all, considered.

authentification or reflection on what is generated. Sadly, it is true that, as James Hopewell observes,

‘Many local church histories are written without reference to the elements that produce tensions and strains... concentrat[ing] instead on dates and accomplishments; they avoid the tension that accompanies the complicated struggle to maintain and enliven any community. Most local church histories are therefore boring.’¹⁸⁷

Whilst care needs to be exercised, for example, in authentification and cross checking to overcome the potential short falls, such locally generated histories can indeed contribute to a sense of identity, self-understanding and hence to transformation of a local congregation. It is not questions of validity or the potential for tedium that strikes me about these approaches; rather it is the inherent insularity, failing to perceive or to investigate how the local story is part of a wider, denominational story and/or how in turn the wider story has, or may, impact on or speak to, a local congregation. Philip Richter, bemoaning the paucity of denominational studies, notes that, however irrelevant individuals or congregations may perceive them to be, they ‘will be constrained to some degree by their denominational heritage ...’¹⁸⁸ Whether or not congregations recognise or acknowledge it, they are in some sense part of a bigger story, both influenced by, and influencing, a denomination. Richter is right to recognise the significance of denominational culture and history, and I feel that it has great potential to speak into local situations, augmenting and perhaps critiquing insights derived locally.

To assert its import is easy, but what is actually meant by denominational history – what is its scope, what is its aim or purpose? As the BHS celebrated its 50th

¹⁸⁷ Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. p. 157

¹⁸⁸ Richter, "Denominational Cultures: The Cinderella of Congregational Studies." p.172

anniversary, the Methodist, Gordon Rupp addressed the society and, noting the ecumenical value of denominational history, observed that Church History is ‘a living witness to the communion of saints, the path along which God has led us... our most precious contribution to the coming great Church.’¹⁸⁹ Rupp closed his address by comparing a tea-chest of pamphlets and leaflets (to which a minister’s widow was about to set fire!) to the Ark of Covenant, a repository of reminders of God’s goodness, stressing to the society the importance of gathering archive material that to the uninitiated may appear worthless. Whilst his Ark of Covenant metaphor is attractive, and hints at the enormous scope of what might be included, denominational history as a mere repository of archive material is not – how is this treasure to be accessed and for what purpose is it to be employed? If, as I believe, history is a useful resource for congregational self-understanding and church health, and if denominational history has the potential to augment that generated locally, then questions must be asked about the suitability of the available resources for this purpose and it is to this that attention is now turned.

Baptist Denominational History Today

Baptist denominational history writing generally consists of two types: short, often specialist, articles, and substantial works of a more general nature. The short articles, published in the *Baptist Quarterly*, cover a wide range of topics including biography, congregational history and accounts of Baptist involvement in issues or events of national or international importance, reflecting in some measure Wheeler Robinson’s vision. Sadly however, his Cinderella prediction has also been realised, and circulation of the journal remains small.¹⁹⁰ Whilst some of the large-scale

¹⁸⁹ E. G. Rupp, "The Importance of Denominational History," *The Baptist Quarterly* 17 (1957-1958).

¹⁹⁰ Total membership is 540, including 227 libraries. Personal communication: S. Longford, email, 10 March 2008.

histories, such as Ernest Payne's *Short History of the Baptist Union*¹⁹¹, were commissioned to mark anniversaries, this is in no way normative. The majority of publications, whilst overtly seeking appeal to a wider audience, such as the *English Baptists*¹⁹² series and Roger Hayden's *English Baptist History and Heritage*¹⁹³ appear to serve, primarily, a didactic function, informing the history essays of those seeking accreditation as ministers or lay preachers. These works present a well-established story of the English Baptist tradition, identifying founding fathers, tracing a rise-fall-rise trajectory and noting a number of heroes along the way. Attention is given to Baptist principles and practices – Baptism, communion and church governance – and mention is made of major doctrinal controversies. In both cases, what is presented is, generally, solid, Modern¹⁹⁴ history, competently and painstakingly researched by skilled, often highly respected, professional historians.

In my experience, the published history does not always succeed in engaging its readers, with ministerial students often viewing Baptist history essays as a necessary evil to be encountered on the way to accreditation, some even describing it as 'boring' or 'irrelevant'. Whilst this allegation requires a response, it is important to state quite clearly that what is perceived as 'boring' history is *not* the same as bad history. The questions that arise relate not to the *quality* of what is produced, but to its *accessibility* and its *suitability* for the purpose for which it is to be employed.

Crucially, readily available Baptist histories are not designed to be used as a resource for theological reflection in the area of Church Health. What then, can be done to

¹⁹¹ Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History*.

¹⁹² Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, Randall, *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century*, White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*

¹⁹³ Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage*.

¹⁹⁴ Capitalisation used to refer to their being products of modernity, rather than merely contemporary

address this? Can the appeal of denominational history be widened? How can its potential as a resource be more extensively realised? Might it prove possible to open up Rupp's Ark of denominational history and allow its treasures to be employed for the purposes of health-giving transformation? I believe it can, and some potentially useful avenues of exploration are identified and discussed in the following sections.

History is a set of stories...

With clear echoes of the Wheeler Robinson vision, Rowan Williams asserts that 'history is a set of stories we tell in order to understand better who we are and the world we're in.'¹⁹⁵ Whilst Williams' intent relates primarily to self-understanding, a theme to which I return in a later section, I find within this statement an alternative, possibly a challenge, to the enterprise of attempting to generate a single, overarching history, as has often been the case in the twentieth century. This is no mere rejection of the concept of meta-narrative, rather it is an honest response to the inevitability of human finitude – it is impossible to know, process and understand the whole: any endeavour must constrain its scope to a manageable portion of that whole. The large-scale Baptist denominational histories, providing an overall account of anything up to four centuries of a tradition, are inherently complex and almost inevitably too far removed from the experience of contemporary 'men and women acting under the stress of living convictions'¹⁹⁶ to be assimilated or reflected upon in that context; what is needed is something more readily accessible. What renders stories comprehensible and useful is their inherent partiality: they are of necessity in some sense incomplete (part of a greater collection) *and* they are told from a specific perspective. The concept of history as story, as a form of creative writing, offers

¹⁹⁵ Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 1

¹⁹⁶ Robinson, "The Value of Denominational History." p. 101

greater accessibility and has the potential not only to inform but also to inspire and transform, hence it merits further consideration.

The academic discipline of history has been described as a ‘shifting, problematic discourse ...’¹⁹⁷ This has been especially true during the twentieth century, as historians have continually been forced to re-evaluate and revise their methods and assumptions in the light of world events, shifting ideologies and new technology.¹⁹⁸ From an objective ‘scientific’ discipline, which rigorously endeavoured to establish truth, has emerged one considerably chastened, which, whilst no less thorough espouses plausibility rather than certainty, speaks of histories (plural) and is open to the insights of other disciplines.

One of the challenges for good denominational history writing is the identification of approaches which best serve its needs for the twenty-first century. Within the practical theology field of church health, there is a potentially helpful precedent in American theologian James Hopewell’s seminal work in the field of congregational studies (albeit centred on analogy with myths and folk tales) which was powerfully influenced by narrative approaches to history¹⁹⁹. The key distinctions between narrative history and ‘scientific’ approaches lie in its presentation, which is descriptive rather than analytical, and in its focus, which centres on individuals or small groups rather than nations and statistics.²⁰⁰ The focus on small groups and

¹⁹⁷ Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*. p. 26

¹⁹⁸ For a helpful overview of major developments, see, for example, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*.

¹⁹⁹ Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*.

²⁰⁰ Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History."

examples – almost case studies in some instances²⁰¹ – suggests a way in which Baptist denominational resources, drawing on the extensive archive of primary materials collected and collated by the BHS might readily form the basis for such an approach. Such stories could stand alone or augment and ‘dialogue’ with insights obtained from local, congregational history gathering as part of a process of theological reflection in the area of church health.

However, for all the promise offered by the concept of ‘story,’ a note of caution must be sounded. Professionally trained historians are aware of the challenges and limitations of their work, that whilst it includes verifiable facts (names, dates, places, etc) their work is essentially a *construction* – an interpreted account – rather than a perfectly accurate *reconstruction* of past events and ideas. The lay reader may well not have this awareness, further, for them, the word ‘story,’ often associated with fiction, can be understood pejoratively, as something that is not ‘real’ and hence does not contain ‘truth.’ I offer two alternatives, which, I believe, retain the provisionality that must accompany contemporary approaches to writing about the past whilst potentially facilitating greater accessibility of, and engagement with, the resultant work.

The first of these is ‘poesis’, from which the English word ‘poetry’ is derived, and which refers to the act of making. Parallels can be drawn between poetry and history both of which ‘attempt to do the impossible – which is to express in static, finite form what is actually chaotically formless and in ever-changing flux.’²⁰² There are

²⁰¹ For example, L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500 - 1800* (London: Penguin, 1979), L. Stone, *Uncertain Unions: Marriage in England 1660 - 1753* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

²⁰² B. Southgate, *Why Bother with History?* (Harlow: Pearson Educational, 2000). p. 145

advantages of this term. Firstly, such a view allows for the creative element of history writing in giving form and interpretation to what might otherwise be disparate facts. Secondly it opens up the potential of poetry as an analogy: poetry does not have a one-to-one correlation with ‘fact’ but allows the reader to gain insights, to make connections or discover meanings that are potentially transformative.

A second alternative is the phrase ‘creative non-fiction’²⁰³ used by Brian McLaren to describe his theological writing, which employs a fictive narrative as a medium for expressing his ideas. Not totally dissimilar to this, and possibly of more immediate relevance, is the recent practice of television dramas being constructed from primary historical records. Interpretive licence notwithstanding, viewers are enabled to engage with information about the past in a way that is relevant to them in the present. In reality, this approach is not new, finding a precedent, albeit less sophisticated, among, for example, 17th century Baptist writers debating marriage, where imaginary conversations were used to express and explore opposing opinions.²⁰⁴

A work of poesis, creative non-fiction (or possibly even historically based drama) telling the story of which we are a part is a challenge to draw together evidence – including that which may make us feel uncomfortable – without falling prey to the

²⁰³ A phrase used Brian McLaren to describe his ‘New Kind of Christian’ trilogy, which whilst it is theology not history, adopts story as a medium of communication: McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word after That: A Tale of Faith, Doubt and a New Kind of Christianity*, McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*, McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian*.

²⁰⁴ J. Griffith, *The Unlawfulness of Mixt-Marriages or an Answer to the Book Entituled Mixt Marriages Vindicated in a Dialogue between a and B Written by Stephen Tory in a Friendly Discourse between E and F* (London: 1681), S. Tory, *Mixt Marriages Vindicated or a Discourse of Mixt Marriages by Way of a Dialogue between a and B Who Are of the Same Profession in Matters of Religion but of Different Apprehensions in the Point of Marriage* (London: 1640).

desire to tidy it up and make it presentable. The historian would work carefully with primary sources to discover and retell the “warts ‘n’ all” stories of the real people who wrestled with real issues and the tensions they faced, allowing readers to gain insights into how they might respond to their own challenges.

Glimpses of God

Whilst the production of sets of stories may improve accessibility to the treasures of denominational history, there are other factors that need to be considered, one of which is overtly theological or spiritual: what might be termed the God-factor. Modern, objective history is understandably wary of any mention of supernatural – or divine – agency on the grounds that it cannot be verified. This presents a real challenge for writers of church history: how can the demands of rigorous historical research be held in a creative tension with the beliefs of those whose story is being told? Whilst a healthy caution is to be applauded, in my view, the tendency to exclude any reference to the divine in Baptist history diminishes its potential as a theological resource.

Key aspects of Christianity are its beliefs both in a God who acts in human history and specifically in a God who mandates the existence of the Church: surely this should be reflected in the stories we tell. According to Rowan Williams, one of the tasks for church history is ‘the challenge [-] to trace the way in which the Church has demonstrated its divine origin.’²⁰⁵ Similarly, Paul Fiddes, notes that ‘[i]f God has really acted in *our* history, then one would expect there to be some traces which a historian could pick up’²⁰⁶ (emphasis original). He observes, pertinently, ‘if we cannot speak of God’s action in the past we shall also not be able to speak of God’s

²⁰⁵ Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 2

²⁰⁶ P. Fiddes, "God and History," *The Baptist Quarterly* 30 (1983-1984). p. 75

action in *present* events...²⁰⁷ and, writing elsewhere, offers the delightful image of ‘a God who has “just passed by” and of whose back we are graciously allowed to catch a glimpse.’²⁰⁸ Following his lead, I am inclined to assert that if Baptists believe that God acts in their present – to inspire, to guide, to transform – then they must expect to find hints of the same action in their history. To make such an assertion has major implications for the reading and writing of history, and it is imperative that neither simplistic eisegesis (reading in) nor impertinent assertion is permitted to distort that endeavour.

For the professional historian, trained in critical research, the very idea of writing God into the story is disturbing – yet, for those writing or reading denominational history from within a framework of faith, the God-factor cannot simply be ignored. From a Baptist perspective, Rob Ellis offers a very helpful exploration of ‘the interface between historical and theological method’²⁰⁹ asking ‘is there a way in which contemporary Christians can speak of God’s influence or action with integrity’²¹⁰ a question he answers by deriving a sevenfold scheme of ground rules.²¹¹

- (i) History takes as its subject all past events
- (ii) The historian must seek immanent causes
- (iii) God must not be substituted for immanent causes

²⁰⁷ Fiddes, "God and History." p. 75

²⁰⁸ P. S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Paternoster, 2003). p. 3

²⁰⁹ R. Ellis, "God and History," *The Baptist Quarterly* 32 (1987-1988). p55

²¹⁰ Ellis, "God and History." p. 55

²¹¹ ———, "God and History." p. 68

- (iv) The historian uses [their] present experience in reconstructing and comprehending the past
- (v) Some analogy must be affirmed in order for any sense to be made at all
- (vi) The evidence must be accounted for adequately
- (vii) While analogy must be affirmed, there is a circular motion in which our arbitrating 'experience' or 'common sense' can be transformed and expanded

Ellis's concern – and one with which I concur – is that the writer of history does not leapfrog immanent, human explanations in order to attribute action or insight to God. However, for the Christian historian, their experience – and the interpretive analogues they employ – will be informed by their faith, their belief in God, their study of the Bible, their spiritual experience and so on. This scheme provides a helpful basis for the Christian historian who wishes to leave open the possibility of expressing a divine element within their writing and serves as a reminder that, even when the 'God-factor' does not appear explicitly, it will, (or at least should) inform – and transform - their thinking. It is to this potential for transformation that attention is now turned.

Feeds and Nourishes

So far, attention has focussed on the writer of denominational history, but what about the reader? Rowan Williams optimistically asserts that Christians study 'history for what feeds and nourishes belief now ... [expecting to] emerge with some greater

fullness of Christian maturity'²¹² – i.e. that it is somehow both educationally and spiritually transformative. However, my own experience suggests that ‘an average believer, of any denomination or tradition, is scarcely aware of [their] intrinsic duty to study history’²¹³ let alone the responsibilities and/or expectations that it might demand of them. How might the gulf between reality and ideal be bridged? One possibility is to employ an analogy with the use Christians make of the Bible, not least because large parts of it, in the Hebrew Scriptures especially, are theologically interpreted history – ‘the hand of God in history.’²¹⁴ When Christians approach the Bible, they usually do so with a sense of anticipation: they expect it to have meaning and relevance for their lives, it is understood as a medium through which one can gain glimpses of God and through which God’s voice can be heard. The practice of preaching sermons, and the production of commentaries and study aids, is predicated on a core belief that this collection of stories is relevant, and that engagement with it will not merely inform, but also transform faith and practice. The perennial popularity of the book of Esther, which makes no explicit mention of God²¹⁵, yet which is accepted as canonical, may offer a precedent for a more Biblical approach to reading (and potentially also to writing) history. Might it be possible to assert that ‘God inspires all history that is well and faithfully written’²¹⁶ – even, or maybe especially, when it is explicitly the history of a part of God’s people – and that readers should approach it accordingly?

²¹² Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 3

²¹³ G. Florovsky, "The Predicament of the Christian Historian," in *God, History and Historians*, ed. McIntire, C. T. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). p. 407

²¹⁴ P. Hincliff, *God and History: Aspects of British Theology 1875 - 1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). p. 116

²¹⁵ Here I assume its Hebrew, canonical form rather than the Greek, deuterocanonical version

²¹⁶ A. S. Link, "The Historian's Vocation," in *God, History and Historians*, ed. McIntire, C. T. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). p.384

To identify the analogy is relatively simple, to bring about the reality is another matter. The potential can only be achieved if readers are committed to appropriate engagement – and this requires a particular attitude of mind. Here insights from the field of Biblical studies and the literary concept of an ‘ideal’ or ‘implied’ reader are valuable, and I draw on the work of Marcus Bockmeuhl who establishes five inter-related theses on an implied reader of the New Testament.²¹⁷

Firstly, Bockmeuhl’s implied reader has a stake in what is being transmitted, especially in terms of its validity, authenticity and ‘truthful reference.’ Secondly, this person is a convert to the gospel – a committed Christian whose daily life is shaped by their faith. The third thesis is that this person sees the New Testament as authoritative, that it is both trustworthy and has seniority in a personal canon of resources. The fourth thesis is that the reader is part of a faith community and will read and interpret the New Testament within that community. Finally, the reader anticipates and experiences the Holy Spirit’s inspiration in reading the text and expects it to ‘speak’ into their life.

What might an equivalent – idealised - reader of Baptist history look like?

Condensing and re-ordering the theses, I envisage a reader who is a committed Christian, who believes that denominational history matters, and who is seeking authoritative information – trustworthy, traceable, reliable and authentic - which they expect to have importance for them in the daily outworking of their Christian faith.

Such a reader expects history to ‘speak’ to them in a way that is relevant and is open

²¹⁷ M. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocussing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006). p 69 ff. Bockmuehl refers to *the* implied reader, I prefer to use the indefinite article since, whilst general principles can be deduced, the real reader’s partiality (bias and finitude) must also be acknowledged.

to the potential for divine inspiration in *both* the writing and reading of history, whether or not this is explicitly expressed. By strict analogy with Bockmeuhl, and in order for its potential as resource in the field of Church Health to be realised, the reader would be part of a Baptist faith community and would seek to read, understand, interpret and reflect on Baptist history in – or at least in relation to - that context.

How realistic is such a reader? Almost a century ago, Wheeler Robinson made his appeal to those who cherish Baptist convictions – such readers would certainly approximate to the first part of my proposed description. However, he does not (overtly anyway) express the communal aspect of reading and reflection, with its potential for glimpsing God or promoting congregational transformation, anticipated by such a model. Whilst I fear that Wheeler Robinson’s assumptions regarding denominational identity – which are reflected in my idealised reader – cannot be assumed today, I believe that our history does offer a resource for fostering and nurturing such an identity, in turn opening up the potential for greater, communal engagement and transformation. Attention now turns to that endeavour.

The Story We Find Ourselves In

As identified earlier, ‘history is a set of stories we tell in order to understand better who we are...’²¹⁸ Perhaps it can even become ‘The Story We Find Ourselves In.’²¹⁹ With deliberate ambiguity, McLaren’s book title identifies the story both as the context of experience (we are inside it, part of it) *and* as the medium through which identity is discovered (we become). Seen in this way, denominational history is not

²¹⁸ Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 1

²¹⁹ McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian*.

a remote entity to be examined and analysed, rather it is a continuum of experience that shapes and is shaped by its participants. The complex philosophical implications of such a perspective are beyond the scope of this paper, but as a minimum it affirms the importance of understanding denominational history in shaping identity and practice – the generally accepted premise for the requirement for Baptist ministerial students to engage with it.²²⁰

Regrettably, as already noted, my experience has been that many ministerial students perceive the requirement to study Baptist history as a hoop to be gone through. Furthermore many seem to style themselves as ‘evangelical Christians’ instead of, rather than in addition to, any denominational allegiance. Whilst the demise of denominational bigotry and growth of practical ecumenism are to be applauded, the weakened self-understanding of Baptists is regrettable and has potentially damaging implications both for the health of local congregations and the tradition as a whole. Creative engagement with denominational history has the potential to foster a healthy self-understanding and could result in congregations becoming equipped to operate more healthily, possibly even in a more authentically Baptist way.

How can this be achieved? There seem to me to be two important, and ultimately interrelated possibilities. One is in our denominational colleges, where ‘Baptist History and Principles’ continue to form part of the training requirements for BUGB ministers, evangelists and youth specialists; the other, to which I return in the final section of this paper, concerns the BHS, whose publications influentially inform so much of that education.

²²⁰ Personal communication, Goodliffe.

“Why Bother With History?”²²¹

Answering his titular question, Beverly Southgate humorously, but tellingly, observes that ‘babies may not seem to be of any use initially, but they embody infinite possibilities.’²²² If this is true of history in general (as Southgate argues) then how much more of our denominational history with its, as yet seemingly unrealised, potential as a resource for theological reflection, specifically in the area of church health? We may argue that those who dismiss denominational history as irrelevant are throwing out this baby, and with it all this potential, with the proverbial bathwater, but we must also endeavour to respond creatively, something that is attempted, albeit very tentatively, in this section of the paper.

My experience of studying Baptist denominational history was that it consisted of acquisition of knowledge – a didactic approach – rather than development of skills in accessing and reflecting upon the information. Furthermore, of necessity, the content was at the level of overview, mediated via secondary sources and was essentially ‘received wisdom.’ The essays to be written were chosen from a prescribed selection and researched in isolation using a detailed reading list. This experience – essentially a Modern, didactic approach - could not prompt the kind of engagement with denominational history that would inspire its use as a resource for theological reflection; to plagiarise another book title, it was *recycling history* rather than *researching the past*.²²³ How might the insights outlined in this paper helpfully alter that experience?

²²¹ Southgate, *Why Bother with History?*

²²² ———, *Why Bother with History?* p. 12

²²³ Thompson and Cross, *Recycling the Past or Researching History*.

Practical theology begins from experience – the congregational history gathering exercises advocated by church health afford a valuable opportunity both to begin to appreciate how past events and present identity are related and to experience communal historiography. Telling, or writing the story and critically reflecting on the process allows insights to be gained into the tensions and challenges of the historian. Seeking glimpses of God - exploring spiritual aspects of the story would add a distinctly theological slant to the endeavour. Having begun to develop a sense of congregational identity, it is almost inevitable that some aspects or issues would emerge that merit further reflection, and the potential of the wider denominational resource could be explored, initially using readily accessible secondary sources, but potentially also using primary materials. Finally, the output might look rather different from the traditional essays – possibly including poetry, drama, or congregational activities, each accompanied by critical reflection on the process employed.

These would be far from facile undertakings; students would require considerable input and support from college tutors and possibly additional skills training before embarking on such an exercise. However, if the result was a deeper sense of Baptist identity - that this is my story, and I am part of it - and a greater understanding of the potential of this resource as a tool for theological reflection, it would surely prove worthwhile.

Renewing the Vision

The responsibility for changing attitudes and developing potential cannot be left to those whose task is to prepare individuals called to various forms of accredited Baptist ministry, neither can it be left to the ministers themselves. An organisation

devoted to the study, recording and publication of Baptist history must take a leading role. When the Baptist Historical Society was formed it undertook a massive project to collect, collate and catalogue resources. With this work well established, Wheeler Robinson spelled out his aims for the journal – which I have interpreted as a vision for the organisation. As the BHS celebrates its centenary it has a responsibility to review, and renew that excellent vision.

At its launch, *The Baptist Quarterly* aimed to appeal to ‘all who cherish Baptist convictions, and are prepared to love the past for the sake of the present.’²²⁴ Such an appeal needs to be revisited in an age when many individuals seeking accreditation as ministers have no interest in, let alone love for, their past. Could the appeal instead be made to nurture Baptist convictions by encouraging individuals and congregations to engage with the past in order to inform their present and shape their future? If so, how might this be achieved?

Post Modernity is the age of the ‘story.’ The insights from narrative history, and the concepts of ‘poiesis’ and ‘creative non-fiction’ echo Wheeler Robinson’s vision of ‘a picture of real life, with men and women acting under the stress of living convictions.’²²⁵ Rather than a chronological account of heroes, major events, cause and effect or an overarching trajectory, he seems to hint at ‘stories’ of what it meant to be a Baptist in a certain place and a certain time. Further, the use of the word ‘stress’ suggests inclusion of those tensions that make the story ‘live’ in the mind of the reader. Without devaluing the continued importance of the major, overview works, perhaps they need to be supplemented by collections of such stories?

²²⁴ Robinson, "The Aims of 'the Baptist Quarterly'." p. 1

²²⁵ ———, "The Value of Denominational History." p. 101

A further aspect of the Wheeler Robinson vision is that studying history will ‘enabl[e] us to discriminate between the transient and the permanent,’²²⁶ a phrase upon which it is difficult to improve, and yet which demands a note of caution – how much does the writer of history impose their own opinion of transience or permanence upon the story they tell? Present day historians are rightly reluctant to make value judgements of this type, yet implicit in Robinson’s statement may be, I sense, an appeal to reflective practice. Perhaps the statement could be revised to say that our history will enable us to make connections, to identify similarities and differences, to identify patterns, and to glimpse hints of permanence and transience.

Finally is an explicitly spiritual or theological vision, the recognition of ‘the perennial conflict between organization and spirit.’²²⁷ Robinson is right to note the inherent tensions of faith and life, of seeking to discern the mind of Christ and the finitude of human nature; a denominational history that ignores or evades this fails to be fully authentic. Our denominational histories might aim to recognise and affirm the challenges of relating faith and life and, appropriately and competently, to reflect a belief that God acts in human history.

Drawing these suggestions together offers a vision which is consistent with, but renews that of Wheeler Robinson and would, I believe, encourage greater engagement with this rich resource, allowing it to inform theological reflection in a way that promotes church health:

²²⁶ _____, "The Value of Denominational History." p. 104

²²⁷ _____, "The Value of Denominational History." p. 106

To nurture Baptist identity, encouraging individuals and congregations to engage creatively with the past in order to inform their present and shape their future.

It will be the task of another century to reflect on this vision – whether or not it is useful and how well it has been achieved. But I end with the words of Rowan Williams, who may not be a Baptist but whose words express my thesis, that ‘[t]o engage with the Church’s past is to see something of the Church’s future’²²⁸ which in turn ‘makes for the health of the church...’²²⁹

²²⁸ Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 94

²²⁹ ———, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 113

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Excursus – Anticipating a Pastoral Cycle -Towards a Reflection on Practice

My choice to undertake theory-based rather than empirical research under the banner of Practical Theology brought with it many challenges and tensions. I remain convinced that not only is there justification for such an approach, but also a need for thoroughgoing engagement with complex methodological and philosophical arguments to provide a secure basis for that which intuition suggests. At the same time, I am equally convinced that good Practical Theology is readily accessible, not shrouded in the insider language of the academy or hidden away in the dusty recesses of a university library in a thesis no one ever reads. Throughout the programme I found a tension between what I wanted to say and how I needed to say it, between what I was reading and how it was written, between what I wrote and how it was read. The more I wrestled with this, the more intertwined and complexified it became – my own reading and writing, that of the resources I was employing, that of the method/approach I was seeking to generate. The 'reflective practice' paper provided me with the opportunity to reflect on my experiences of reading and writing as a researcher, and I deliberately chose to undertake this within a Pastoral Cycle framework, as described in the following chapter.

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Chapter 4 – Reflection on Practice Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Reading and Writing within the Research Process

This chapter presents a reflection on practice undertaken and initially submitted in 2009 under the auspices of the DPT programme within the University of Manchester.

Introduction and Background

This chapter describes an exercise in reflection undertaken as part of my work as a researching professional. Its structure is based on a ‘pastoral cycle’²³⁰ model and embodies in microcosm the overarching approach to my research – which is inherently iterative or cyclic in nature. Insights are also drawn from other approaches to theological reflection²³¹, from literary theory and communications models.

Firstly, I outline the experiences that prompted me to undertake this reflection. Next I identify and articulate the questions that arose as I sought to understand why this specific experience ‘pressed my buttons.’ A substantial part of the chapter is devoted to the theoretical methods (resources) I have employed to assist the reflective process after which I employ a series of metaphors to express my reflections. I complete this iteration of the pastoral cycle by identifying implications for my continued work as a reflective practitioner and researching professional.

Finally, a brief after word hints at the inherently incomplete nature of what has been undertaken.

²³⁰ The basic model is as described in Green, *Let's Do Theology*. My development of the model is described in my literature review, C. J. M. Gorton, "Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: Literature Review," (University of Manchester, 2007).

²³¹ Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, E. Graham, H. Walton, and F. Ward, *Theological Reflection: Sources* (London: SCM Press, 2007).

Before discussing the reflective process and its outcomes, I offer an observation I consider important. A key theme of this reflection is the written word; the implications of this within a piece of academic writing must be recognised. One of the motivators for this chapter is a desire to challenge in some way my experience as a University Manchester research student, namely the expectation of the academy that serious research must be expressed in complex technical language that may be largely incomprehensible to the ‘intelligent lay reader.’²³² This conflicts with my understanding of the ethos of practical theology, namely that anyone can, and everyone should, engage in theological thinking; for this to be possible the language and style of writing employed must support that conviction. At the same time, practical theology has its own struggles within the academy, sometimes being dismissed as a ‘soft option’ or ‘not quite kosher,’ and requires sophisticated exploration and communication of sometimes abstract and complex ideas in order to secure its credibility. The tension of endeavouring to serve *both* the academy *and* the pew cannot be underestimated, and my hope in this chapter is, partly, to see if this apparent mismatch can be satisfactorily addressed. Hence, I endeavour to avoid theological jargon wherever possible and to keep sentence and linguistic structures reasonably simple, demonstrating that it is possible to resolve the tension creatively and constructively. Further, whilst I have supported and resourced my reflection with insights from academic literature, there are no direct quotations within the text and footnotes have been used sparingly to indicate sources. This chapter is a deliberate attempt to experiment with a more accessible and ‘stand alone’ form of

²³² Those who champion this new style of doctorate understand the challenges and tensions of professional doctorates as distinct from more traditional approaches and the implications for both students and academic professionals are not trivial. This interplay of challenge and opportunity in ‘triangulating’ academy, praxis and professional development is recognised by writers in the field e.g. E. Graham, "The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: An Idea Whose Time Has Come?," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 10, no. 2 (2006).

writing, recognising that the ‘person in the pew’ may have neither opportunity nor incentive to read supporting works.²³³

Starting from Experience

The thesis of my research is that denominational history has the potential to offer a rich resource for theological reflection in the area of congregational studies known as church health, specifically in relation to exploring the possibility for changes in (local) pastoral practice. Central to this thesis is the availability of such material in a format that can be used by interested people in local churches, many, if not most, of whom will have had no formal theological or historical training, and who may, by dint of age or circumstance, have been denied opportunities to more than basic education. It rapidly became clear that accessibility of material was a real issue in two distinct ways.

Firstly, literal access to resources. There exist a number of publicly available overview Baptist denominational histories, which can (ostensibly) be purchased or borrowed from a library by interested persons. In reality the ‘person in the pew’ may be unaware of their existence or unable to obtain copies of them. This issue becomes more significant for original source documents or specialist essays which may be accessed only via specialist libraries (such as the Angus library in Oxford or John Rylands (Deansgate) in Manchester) or the British Library in London. Members of local congregations simply cannot access much interesting and useful material because specialist libraries are, understandably, somewhat precious about granting access to old or scarce documents. If the potential of the resource is to be realised,

²³³ Further exploration of this assertion and identification of, and engagement with, relevant literature would be a useful avenue of future work

means must be found of making enough of it physically available to local congregations.

Even if literal access can be achieved, the problems are not resolved. Ability to access – identify and understand - the useful insights, ideas and processes underlying the published works is an equally important, concern. A number of factors are apparent in the light of the reading I have undertaken in the areas of historical methods and literary theory. It is immediately obvious that the publications most readily available are far from ideal for the purposes of theological reflection.

Predominantly they are broad-brush overview accounts of the emergence and growth of a Christian tradition and tend to concentrate on doctrinal debates, key figures and national events. It rapidly became clear that a key aspect of my work would involve consideration of what suitable resources might look like; indeed the development of a model/method for this will now form the main focus of my research.

One important consequence of beginning to think about the types of material that would be useful for local congregations wishing to use denominational history as a resource for theological reflection was that I gained a heightened awareness of my own experience of reading and of writing. Questions began to form in my mind and I became intrigued by the interplay of what I am doing as participant in this programme (developing skills as a researching professional, undertaking some original research, reflecting theologically) and what I am researching (methods of history writing, literary theory, use of history for theological reflection purposes). I began to realise that the questions I want to ask of the material I work with are also questions I need to be conscious of in my own work.

Questions, questions!

The questions that have arisen relate to my roles both as a reader and as a writer.

The two are inevitably interconnected, and distilling the questions is not trivial, however in order to undertake this reflective process, I have endeavoured to separate them.

Researcher as Reader

As a reader, the first question I have sought to clarify is “what is my purpose in reading?” There is no simple answer to this question, since at different times that purpose will vary, however a number of initial responses were identified:

1. To acquire information or new knowledge
2. To seek evidence of purpose within the text (i.e. what do I think the writer is trying to achieve?)
3. To seek evidence of process or method in the text (i.e. how do I think the writer has developed the arguments presented in the text and/or how have they set about presenting those arguments?)
4. To seek evidence of an intended or presumed readership (i.e. for whom do I think the writer is writing?)
5. To problematise (ask questions of) or critique (comment upon) what is written (i.e. to engage in ‘conversation’ with the text rather than accepting it as it stands – c.f. item 1. above)

Given this list of purposes (and implied questions) it is clear that the reading exercise is complex and an area where I still need to develop my skills is articulating my aims in reading a given text at a given time. In practice I will need to read and re-read texts with different aims, for example an initial reading to gain an overview of the

content, a close reading (e.g.) seeking evidence of process or purpose and a further reading to critique (e.g.) the method adopted. Rather than an objective process of information acquisition, reading is a complex, subjective process – at least for me as I hone my skills as a researching professional²³⁴.

My reading in the field of historical method heightened my existing awareness of the impossibility of perfect, agenda-free objectivity. This extends beyond the ‘purpose’ of reading to include a sense of self-awareness regarding factors such as culture and education. A further set of questions arises:

1. What presuppositions do I bring with me *of which I am aware*? For example, my view that many Baptists consider denominational history boring or irrelevant inevitably influences my attitude to what I read – do I expect it to be boring; do I seek only confirmatory evidence and either miss or ignore that which contradicts my presuppositions?
2. What agenda drives my reading – not just the ostensible purpose of my reading in response to the questions outlined above, but my own driving factors e.g. as a researcher or minister?
3. Am I really reading out of the text what it says (exegeis) or am I reading things into it (eisegesis)?
4. Am I becoming aware of blind spots in my reading? For example,
 - a. Am I becoming aware of gaps in my knowledge/understanding that need to be addressed?

²³⁴ This topic is addressed in literature on study skills, such as, for example, N.-J. Lee, *Achieving Your Professional Doctorate* (Maidenhead: McGraw Hill OUP, 2009). Part of my own challenge is avoid falling back into my ‘old ways’ of reading, i.e. continued endeavour not only to be self-aware but actively self-critical.

- b. Do I need to go back and re-read something because of new insights/knowledge/understanding?
5. How do my context and/or culture shape my reading? For example, the fact that I am an English, Baptist, postgraduate researcher.
6. What about the ‘unknown unknown’ – those influences or blind spots of which I am unaware? If they become ‘known unknowns’ how will I address them?

Researcher as Writer

The questions that arise in considering my role as a writer compliment those asked about that of reader. A key question is “for whom am I writing?” The answer to this question varies according to which aspect of my work I am considering and includes:

1. Writing for myself – note-taking and journaling
2. Writing for peers – work in progress, informal presentations, seminars
3. Writing for the academy – formal submissions
4. Writing for theologians and historians simultaneously – a hybrid audience
5. Writing for ‘people in the pew’ - a longer term aim

Allied to ‘who’ is the question ‘why?’ What is the purpose of writing and how does that shape *both* the experience of creating a text *and* the style, language and genre of what is written? In exploring these questions I have discovered the tension of needing (and desiring) to influence the academy with its requirements of language and style when the whole issue of (in-)accessibility is essential to what I am trying to achieve. Further, in contemplating the elements of the research portfolio, I realise that the formal academic submissions require different styles/genres and different

audiences must be satisfied – some of them concurrently. For example, the publishable article, submitted to the centenary conference of the Baptist Historical Society²³⁵ needed to engage and influence world-class Baptist historians and theologians at the same time as meeting the requirements of the university²³⁶. By contrast, this piece feels different: it is at once *both* inherently more introspective, drawing on the researcher's own experience and thought (a 'theology by heart' approach²³⁷) *and* a formal account of an aspect of research, designed to meet specified learning outcomes within the academy.

Although not explored in this chapter, the exercise of writing for self and then reading what self has written is clearly a complex and rich area for reflection. So-called auto-ethnography²³⁸ is an area that potentially offers useful insights both in relation to the literal individual self and also the corporate 'self' of a local congregation or Christian denomination. The historian or practical theologian is more than a 'participant observer' but is a 'member of the body' in a way analogous to that expressed by the apostle Paul in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 13. The concept of 'embeddedness' – of writing and reading from within the story - whilst not currently part of my work remains on the periphery of my thinking and may need to be addressed at a later date.

²³⁵ C. J. M. Gorton, "Renewing the Vision: History for the Health of the Church," in *Baptist Historical Society Centenary Conference* (Prague: 2008).

²³⁶ ———, "Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: Publishable Article," (University of Manchester, 2008).

²³⁷ Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*. Chapter 1

²³⁸ C. Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*, Ethnographic Alternatives Book Series (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), K. Etherington, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Using Ourselves in Research* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2004).

Reading, Writing and Rhetoric?

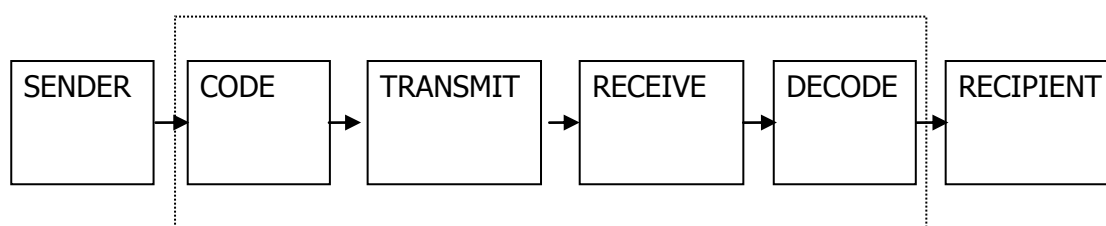
One recurring question in my research work is ‘so what’? To undertake the work may be interesting, enjoyable, novel and worthy from an academic perspective but ultimately ‘so what’? Does it make any real difference to real people in real congregations facing real issues? The same question applies to this chapter – what does it matter that I take time to reflect on questions of reading and writing? Will it make a real difference or is it, ultimately, so much rhetoric? The tensions inherent in the endeavour have at times been almost palpable and the writing ‘halting’ as I have asked myself ‘can I say this’ or ‘how should I express that.’ In reflecting on the questions above, whilst endeavouring to hold the tensions creatively, it has proved helpful to revisit some theoretical frameworks from communications and literary theory.

Through a Glass Darkly – Resources for Reflection

The metaphor of the mirror employed by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church is helpful in reflecting on questions relating to reading and writing, albeit without the promised eschatological (end of time - ‘then...’) hope of perfect clarity! Theories and models of communication recognise the inherent darkness – fuzziness or fogginess – that arises in the process of transferring information from a sender to a recipient. Similarly, models from literary theory recognise the inherent gap between reader and author. Post-modern ideas on ‘meaning’ take this even further, in the extreme rendering the whole literary endeavour inherently meaningless (but with a whole insider language and word-games approach in order so to do!). In this section of the chapter I describe and then employ models which assist my own reflective process.

Communication Models

I first encountered communications models in my teens when attending Christian leadership courses, subsequently in numerous staff development courses such as ‘effective meetings’ or ‘management’ and more recently as part of a course for ministerial mentors. Irrespective of the context, and the purpose or mode of communication, the essential model was as shown below²³⁹:



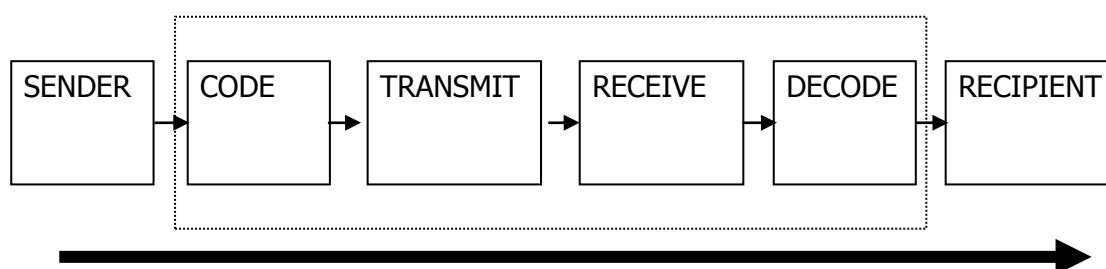
The process begins with a sender (individual, group or organisation) with information they wish to transmit to a recipient (individual, group or organisation). Although largely invisible and largely unconscious, a process is followed for this to occur. The sender must encode the information – choosing a medium and language appropriate for the task. In so doing an element of selection and interpretation occurs as a ‘raw’ idea is translated into a communicable entity such as a letter, phone call, diagram etc. and the message is transmitted – sent – to the recipient. Attention shifts to the recipient who must decode the information – using their interpretive frameworks to assimilate the message. The recipient then owns a version of the message –which may or may not match that intended.

²³⁹ Numerous similar diagrams and models can be found on the internet, however influences in the development of this diagram include the following professional training courses: "Influencing Skills," (Oakridge Centre, Corporate Change Consultants, 1999), "Marketing Skills," (Dunchurch Management College, 1997), "Mentor Training," (Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2008), J. Carter, "An Introduction to Management," (Cardinal Training for NNC Ltd, 1992), J. Redpath and D. Gardner, "Scottish Nuclear Management Skills Course," (1997).

When I have encountered this model a number of presuppositions have been evident. It is taken for granted that the sender and recipient share a common spoken language and will share an (adequate) understanding of any jargon or insider language involved. The purpose of using the model is usually to encourage the trainee to become more aware of potential miscommunication even in a context where conditions are nearing ideal – i.e. communication between peers or individuals from broadly similar contexts. For the purpose of this reflection, some of these presuppositions must be challenged. Whilst the sender and recipient can (usually) be assumed to share a common spoken language, it cannot be assumed that they share common specialist or ‘insider language’. In considering the texts employed in my research, the ‘senders’ are typically professional theologians or historians, many of whom are employed in academic roles. Most senders, and specifically those writing Baptist history, are steeped in Christian terminology and church-language. Whilst at a superficial level the majority of recipients will share a common language, the level of sophistication of that understanding may well be different – as the frequent misquoting and misunderstanding of public figures such as the Archbishop of Canterbury indicate. The potential for meaning to be ‘lost in translation’ even where a common spoken language is used is a real concern.²⁴⁰

This model of understanding how information is transmitted, specifically, but not exclusively, verbally is one tool I have used to resource my reflection. The emphasis of this model, in my experience, is on the role of the sender and increasing their self-awareness in this endeavour. As such it can be understood as a ‘directional’ model:

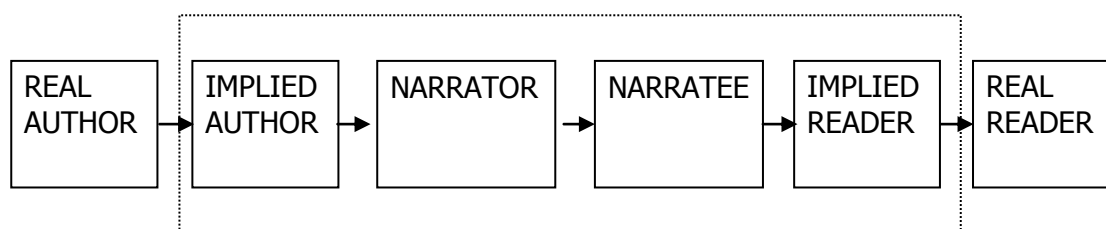
²⁴⁰ In some small way, the inherent challenge of clear communication of (abstract) ideas is illustrated by this paper: there is an interesting irony that expressing a model for describing oral (spoken) communication necessitates the use of a diagram – a semi-pictorial representation. Use of images, diagrams and tables within published works can be very effective, reduce potential for miscommunication and engage a broader range of readers.



Whilst I have found this model helpful, further insights can be gained by considering a model that operates in the opposite direction, from recipient ‘backwards’. One such model is employed in literary theory and it is to this that attention now turns.

Real and Implied – Readers and Writers

I was introduced to literary theory during undergraduate Biblical Studies as one approach, among many, to exploring Biblical texts. Whilst it would be an overstatement to say that this revolutionised my approach to Bible reading, the insights gained, and my interest in the approach are equally relevant to the reading of historical documents and sources. Literary theory is a field which continues to develop, and within which there is a diversity of opinion, however, a basic model is widely accepted and is expressed diagrammatically below²⁴¹:



²⁴¹ J. C. Anderson and Moore, *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). See also W. Iser, *How to Do Theory* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), W. Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1974).

Before discussing the model, it is helpful to clarify what is meant by each ‘person’ identified.

The real author is a person (or potentially a group of persons) who lives in a specific place at a specific time and whose life (individual or corporate) is shaped by specific culture, worldview and religious beliefs. He/she/they choose what it is they wish to convey, to whom and how.

The implied author is a construct, the identity of whom is deduced by careful reading of the text. Clues are sought within the text – *both* the language and style employed *and* the selection of material – to what may crudely be termed the personality of the author (for an example see discussion of implied reader, below). A ‘picture’ of this author can be constructed and, whilst it cannot (usually) be proven, it can be a useful tool in seeking to understand the text, its original context (sometimes termed *sitz im leben*) and something of what the author may have been endeavouring to achieve (authorial intent).

The narrator is the ‘person’ who tells the story. This is not the same as the implied author (though the distinction is not always clear). In most narratives the narrator is an omnipresent observer – able to see events in different places simultaneously, observing events as a third party when no witnesses were evidently present. In fictional narratives the narrator is able to see inside the minds of the characters; in gospel accounts he (she?) is able to observe, for example, Jesus alone in the wilderness, in the Garden of Gethsemane or with two others on the Emmaus road despite not being literally present.

The narratee is the person(s) within the text to whom the ‘story’ is told. The identification of this person is not, in my view, always possible; whilst in some fiction there is a clear narratee – be that a character within the story or the ‘gentle reader’ to whom reference is made - I am less confident that such a person can be defined or identified in works of non-fiction²⁴².

The implied reader is the counterpart of the implied author, and is a construction developed from clues in the text. The evidence that may indicate characteristics of the writer may equally apply to readers, albeit by asking different questions. This is illustrated by example: in the account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman on the gospel of John says,

The Samaritan woman said to him “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (*For Jews do not associate with Samaritans*) (John 4:9 NIVi emphasis mine)

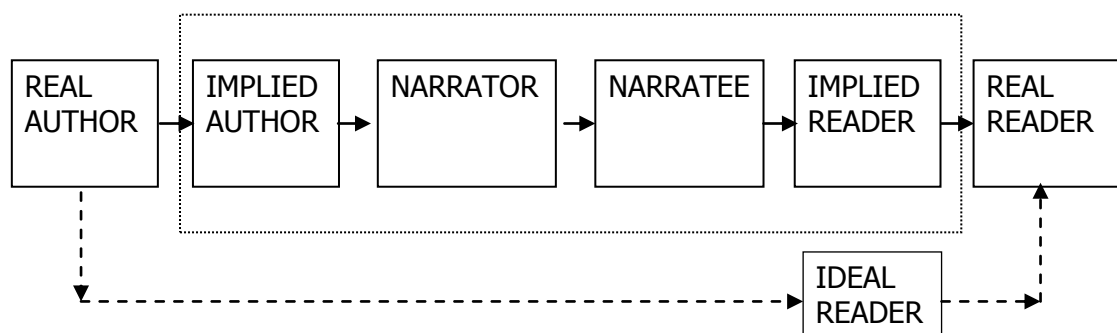
Why does the writer choose to include the words I have italicised? What does it suggest about the writer? What does it suggest about the reader? Might it be that the reader is unaware of the significance of this encounter from a racial/religious perspective?²⁴³ By carefully examining the whole gospel, this and other clues enable a ‘picture’ of an implied reader to be developed. Like the implied author, this is a construct and may not reflect anyone who ever read the text, but allows new perspectives to be gained.

²⁴² Although it is noted that in the gospels of Matthew and Mark the creative device ‘let the reader understand’ may be understood to function in this way (Matt 24:15, Mk 13:14)

²⁴³ A further question one might wish to pose is ‘were these words in the original text or are they a later editorial addition?’ Exploring this question would give further hints about both writer and intended (and/or original) reader(s).

The real reader is the person who reads the text and seeks to find information, meaning or insight from it. Again this person is shaped by many factors – gender, age, education, nationality, religious affiliation and so on. In practice, of course, there may be many real readers each with different reasons for reading the text. Recognising oneself with the role of a ‘real reader’ allows a more self-aware engagement with the text.

The model described is one of many variants that emerge from literary theory. One variation on the model identifies the concept of an ‘ideal reader’²⁴⁴ who lies between the real author and the real reader; the two models being illustrated in the diagram below:



The ideal reader is similar to, but not necessarily identical with, the implied reader. The ideal reader can be understood as the person who would be the perfect recipient of the message transmitted by the real author – having a worldview exactly matched by the assumptions in the text and an aim in reading exactly as envisaged by the writer. Such a person cannot, of course, exist, yet all writers whether consciously or unconsciously are writing for an audience – be that the academy, the person in the pew or, more accurately, a perception of that person or group. The difference between the ‘ideal’ and ‘implied’ reader, as I understand it, depends on the

²⁴⁴ R. M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (London: Continuum, 2001), W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

‘direction’ of construction. Whilst the ideal reader exists in the mind of the real writer, the implied reader is constructed by real readers approaching the text in a specific way. For the purposes of this chapter, I am less concerned with the minutiae of the models and the subtle differences or overlaps between these two postulated readers than the implications they have for me as both a reader and a writer of texts. As a reader, I am seeking to understand what is being communicated by the writer and to make sense of it for my own purposes; as I writer I am trying to communicate my own ideas to others. In each case a key endeavour is that of finding or generating ‘meaning’ a complicated concept which is now very briefly considered.

Meaningless, Meaningless, Everything is Meaningless!

Both the cry of the teacher in Ecclesiastes that ‘everything is meaningless’ and the subsequent search for meaning find significant resonance in the thinking of some Post-modern thinkers. Yet, whilst the ancient philosopher appears to have sought meaning in purpose, the Post-modern approach is considerably more abstract and is often linked with concepts of ‘self’ and ‘consciousness’ that are beyond the scope of this chapter. Nonetheless, the question of meaning is important and cannot readily be separated from that of purpose.

At the heart of some Post-modern thought is the idea that meaning is not inherent in a text (nor yet in an object, ritual, utterance, etc) but is determined within a context – a community or organisation which has some shared view of what is meant by it. The assortment of black squiggles on white paper has meaning only because there exists a shared interpretive code for that object – it is a text. The text has meaning only because there is a shared interpretive code for the squiggles – a language, a set

of grammar and vocabulary etc. The language has meaning only because it is shared by a group.

One does not need to look to far or be a philosopher to begin to appreciate this – words change their meaning *both* according to the contemporary context in which they are used *and* through time within a common context. Countless examples could be cited to illustrate this, not least the rapidly changing ‘slang’ or ‘street language’ where words such as ‘wicked’ and ‘sick’ become (briefly) terms of approval rather than disapproval. Technical terminology and specialist language take this still further: the description of John Wesley as a ‘reasonable enthusiast’ will be understood differently according to the reader’s knowledge of etymology and theology: was he merely someone who was ‘fairly keen’ or is he someone in whom ‘enthusiasm’ (a sense of special spiritual insight) and ‘reason’ were found to be balanced? Words games and puns can be, and are, used to great effect by insiders (who find meaning) and to exclude outsiders (who will either fail to find meaning or will be misled (deliberately or otherwise)). For the researching professional whose worlds overlap the academy and the local congregation, both the making and obscuring of meaning need to be held in mind both as a reader and as a writer.

Lenses, Prisms and Kaleidoscopes – Reflecting on Practice

Having outlined the theoretical models/frameworks that have informed my reflection, I now describe in more detail those reflections, first as a reader, then as a writer, before exploring how the two are in fact inter-related. As a framework for my reflections, I employ a series of metaphors - the lens, the prism and the kaleidoscope. Of these, the lens and the prism are helpful in considering my role as

both reader and writer, whilst the kaleidoscope assists my overall endeavour to discover connections, create patterns and find meaning in the enterprise.

Varifocal Lenses? Selecting Reading Glasses, Diagnosing Defective Vision

The metaphor of ‘lens’ is widely used to describe a stance deliberately adopted by a reader, specifically in an attempt to ‘see’ from a perspective other than their own.

This metaphor is important for reflecting on my work: I try to see the text from what I perceive to be the viewpoint of a ‘person in the pew’ or a ‘theologian’ or some other ‘person’ (albeit a construct). In other words, I select ‘reading glasses’ through which I see the texts. However, the approach is over-simplified assuming that I have perfect ‘vision’ in every other respect, which is not the case. As is evident from the models in communication and literary theory, real readers or recipients have ‘defects’ in their vision caused by e.g. culture, education, language, religious beliefs and so on – a form of short sightedness (myopia), tunnel vision (glaucoma) or clouded vision (cataracts) perhaps? The lenses that I need to adopt as a researching professional need a more complex ‘prescription’ than simply trying to read with empathy for a particular group: I need to be aware of my own ‘condition’ and endeavour to remedy it in order that my vision is as clear as possible. How achievable this actually is cannot readily be measured: there will be aspects of my own bias of which I am totally unaware, there will be errors in my perception of the perspective of others. Just as an optician cannot offer perfect vision to a patient, being constrained by the available range of prescription lenses, so my own reader-vision whilst better can never be totally objective or value free; what it can be is more consciously self-aware.

In considering my role as a writer, the metaphor of the lens continues to be valuable and helpful. As I endeavour to transmit ideas to others I must select a lens through which to focus them so that what is received can be 'seen' clearly. Ideally, the message sent would be such that with 'uncorrected' vision the recipient would be able to do this, in reality flaws at each end of the process will inhibit this.

Nonetheless, self-awareness and consideration of my 'ideal' reader(s) or target audience(s) reduce the potential for miscommunication.

Perhaps a helpful metaphor is that of the varifocal lens, in which the prescription is graduated, allowing the wearer to employ different parts of it to clarify sight in different contexts? In other words, rather than choosing to read through my own defective 'eyes', or choosing a single lens to correct it to another perspective, I need a range of lenses or a single varifocal lens to allow me to shift between several perspectives, bringing into focus different aspects as are needful at the time?

The lens metaphor is helpful but, like all metaphors, is only partially valid: the 'like' and 'not like' aspects of a metaphor are each significant. Two other metaphors within an over-arching 'optical' theme are discussed below.

Using Prisms: From Monochrome to Colour

A second metaphor I find helpful is that of a prism – a triangular block of glass through which light is refracted to reveal its constituent parts within the visible spectrum – the familiar rainbow. The hermeneutic task – broadly that of interpretation - can be compared, at least to some extent, to that that of using a prism to 'divide' light into its constituent parts, allowing new insights to be gained.

In my role as a reader, the series of questions identified represents a spectrum of insights that can be gained from a single text: there is new knowledge to be gained, there are insights into the author's likely aim, method or process, hints of intended readership and potential for focussing (critical) attention on a specific aspect of what is written. The text is not monochrome, with a single, prescribed meaning; rather it is a mixture of information, method, interpretation and so on. By acting as a prism to separate out distinct colours (something which is, strictly, a function of the limits of human vision anyway²⁴⁵) I gain insights that help me to understand better what it is I am researching both in terms of content and, in a more abstract fashion, as a heightened awareness of the challenge of creating and interpreting texts.

Prisms can also be used 'in reverse' to combine discrete colours of light into a single beam of (more or less) white light. In my role as a writer this is in some measure what I am endeavouring to achieve. The insights gained from models of communication and literary theory, combined with the new knowledge obtained from diverse sources are combined in the endeavour of producing a single, clear argument which is able to serve the needs of its intended audience (be that the academy or the pew). That such readers may refract my work through prisms of their own and discover their own 'rainbows' is a possibility over which I have no control and is part of the inherent tension and mystery of the endeavour.

Like the lens, this analogy is not perfect, however, the recognition of the multiplex nature of light that can be divided into recognisable colours and/or combined to

²⁴⁵ The visible spectrum represents only a small part of the spectrum of electromagnetic radiation, and the selection of seven colours was somewhat arbitrary, with not all humans able to 'see' the distinctions between blue, indigo and violet for example.

produce new shades is one I find helpful in expressing something of my endeavours as a reader and writer.

A Kaleidoscope of Possibilities: New and Changing Patterns

My final metaphor is the kaleidoscope, borrowed from a work on metaphors for ecclesiology²⁴⁶. The author saw different images used for the church not as mutually exclusive alternatives but as the equivalent of the chips of coloured glass in a child's kaleidoscope, which could be twisted and turned to create new, and infinitely varied, patterns, each one beautiful in its own right. It is a powerful metaphor that I find helpful in contemplating my role as a researching professional seeking to cross the boundaries of theology and history, the academy and the congregation. In my reading, whichever lenses I am employing, and as the prism enables me to discover the diverse colours within a single text, I am seeking new 'chips of glass' to add to my kaleidoscope, greedy like a child for more and better patterns! In my writing I am twisting and turning the kaleidoscope, maybe sometimes even shaking it in frustration, as I seek to generate a beautiful pattern – a new blend of theological insights and academic knowledge, something that will be transformative and accessible, something that will offer life and hope to real congregations facing real challenges. This is not the work of one season, nor is it ever a final word: there will always be new chips to add and more twists of the kaleidoscope to be attempted. Rather it is an example of the cyclic nature of practical theology in which experience raises questions, questions seek resources to aid reflection, and reflection prompts action which in turn leads to new experiences...

²⁴⁶ P. S. Minnear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (London: Lutterworth, 1959).

Renewed Vision – And so to Action!

Three years into the research programme, it has been good to reflect on my role both as a reader and as a writer, bearing in mind some of the tensions I face in attempting to explore methods for telling/writing denominational history so that its potential as a source for theological reflection in the area of church health can be realised. The insights I have gained from reading ‘for new knowledge’ have forced me to question my own approach both to reading and writing and have, to some extent ‘stalled’ my work both as I have tried to make sense of the implications of this for my work and as I have begun to sense some of the tensions of academic writing around themes involving accessibility.

As I continue to read and re-read texts, I am becoming more consciously aware of my intentions –choosing which part of a varifocal lens through which to read. I still need to develop my skills to do this effectively and efficiently – I am far from being a prism able to split out distinct features in a single reading! My main challenge for action is to be more consciously aware of my intention(s) as a reader and to allow this to enhance my experience.

The challenge of writing will continue throughout this programme as decisions have to be made about target audiences/ideal readers which may conflict (or be in tension with) those for whom my work is ultimately intended. One of my challenges is to meet the demands of the academy, in terms of rigour and sophistication, without losing sight of aim of making denominational history accessible and relevant to people in local congregations who may not be equipped to participate in academic word games. I understand practical theology as a theology of the people. This does not make it poor theology or even simplistic theology; indeed profound insights and

understandings emerge from it. I believe it needs to be theology in ‘plain speech’ avoiding jargon and ‘insider’ language that obscures meaning or excludes participants. I see finding a creative means of balancing academic rigour with plain speech as both a challenge and an opportunity, allowing me to do what I am advocating²⁴⁷.

As a more consciously aware reader and writer, I will move to new experiences of both, will find new questions arising and may need new resources to assist my reflection. As the chips of glass in my metaphorical kaleidoscope twist and turn, the pictures I discover are never the final finished work, but will hopefully be something others can enjoy and appreciate.

After Word: Spiegel im Spiegel

This chapter differs from my more usual exercises in written reflection because it has been prepared for academic assessment. It began as a fairly fluid piece of work with discontinuities (gaps in logic) and in informal English without references or footnotes. From an initial rough version emerged a draft for comment, and thence, after radical editing to meet word count limits, a final submitted form. The reflective process continues – as could revision of this chapter – infinitely, like the reflections in a pair of plain mirrors located opposite one another. As an observer steps between the two mirrors they first observe a single reflection, only after a few moments (however fleeting) do they notice the mirror in the mirror (Spiegel im Spiegel) and

²⁴⁷ Useful future ‘conversation partners’ in this endeavour may well emerge from the field of liberation theology, both in terms of the vital role of experience and in considering pedagogy; examples include Paulo Freire, Anthony Reddie and Jeff Astley: J. Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology (Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Continuum, 1994), P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Ramos, M. B. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), A. G. Reddie, *Nobodies to Somebodies: A Practical Theology for Education and Liberation* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2003).

the endless succession of reflections. This reflective piece must end – I must step out from the mirrors and move on – yet the ongoing process of being a reflective practitioner caught forever between mirrors continues as, imperceptibly, the number of images within them continues to increase. Now we see in a glass darkly, then... if not with perfect clarity, at least with adequate distinction to find meaning and purpose.

Excursus – A Pastoral Cycle – Towards a Research Proposal

Experience

Three years of research into the possibility of employing Baptist denominational history as a resource for theological reflection, specifically in the area of Church Health, coupled with reflection on the work undertaken had taken me a long way from my starting 'hunch.' Whilst it had affirmed the validity of the hunch, it had also demonstrated the naivety of my initial approach: it was simply not possible to use the resources that were readily available in this way because they were designed to serve a very different, largely didactic, purpose. The twin aims of satisfying the requirements of the academy and developing something that could be used by ordinary people in ordinary churches had created significant tension and needed to find some form of resolution. At the same time I was increasingly convinced that there was a need for some solid theoretical underpinning not merely of my own work, but much that Practical Theology endeavours to achieve, and that this necessitated the type of project I envisaged, namely one concerned with process or method rather than an empirical, experimental approach.

Analysis/Exploration

There was one central question that needed to be explored at this point: what form should the detailed research take and why? From, at one extreme, a largely empirical approach grounded in the theoretical work already undertaken, to, at the other extreme, a purely theoretical approach, different models needed to be identified and considered.

Subsidiary questions, having identified an approach, would be concerned with identifying resources or 'conversation partners' in developing and substantiating a

method for writing Baptist denominational history, and what the structure of the project, and its related thesis, might be.

Reflection

The reflective phase consisted primarily of identifying a number of options for the research programme, each of which could be readily located within a Pastoral Cycle approach, identifying a preference and determining how it might usefully be researched and developed.

Action/Response

The outcome of this phase was a detailed research proposal, outlining the rationale for the chosen mode of research along with an indicative programme of work and a proposed report structure.

Chapter 5 – Research Proposal

English Baptist Denominational History as a Resource for Theological Reflection in Church Health

This chapter presents the research proposal undertaken at the start of my research project and initially submitted in 2009 under the auspices of the DPT programme within the University of Manchester.

Introduction

At the heart of my research lies the conviction that denominational history has the potential to offer a rich resource for theological reflection, specifically in the field of church health. Initial explorations led me to recognise that in order for this potential to be realised, resources must be made available in a form suited to this purpose, and that my research should focus on developing a theoretical basis for so doing. This chapter, which constitutes a research proposal for this purpose,

- Names the research question and sets it in context
- Identifies a methodological rationale for approaching the question
- Recognises and considers the limitations of, and boundaries for, the project
- Sets out a structure for undertaking and reporting the research

Firstly, I describe the background experience that led me to undertake this work and the broader (denominational) context within which I am working. Next, I identify the main academic foci of my work (church health, historical method, denominational history), noting key ideas and key voices with which I intend to engage in the course of my work. Central to this chapter is the discussion of my preferred approach for the research and the underlying rationale for that choice. After discussing the known boundaries and limits of the project, I identify the

intended outcomes from it along with some of the key resources needed to complete it.

Background, Context and Focus

Starting from Experience: Naming the Research Question

Fundamental to Practical Theology is the explicit location of its starting point in the lived experience of individuals or communities. This section describes the experiences which led me to pursue this avenue of research via an academic qualification, and specifically through the medium of the DPT.

Whilst training for Baptist ministry, I worked with, and became aware of, many congregations embroiled in destructive experiences of conflict, most of which arose from actual or potential changes in pastoral practice. Each congregation was offered assistance (mediation and conflict resolution techniques) to address the presenting situation. However, whilst they learned some valuable skills, I was not convinced that the congregations were any better equipped to approach issues, especially of change, that had the potential to lead to conflict. Rather than focussing on negative experiences, I wanted take a positive approach, exploring how Baptists might better approach issues that had the potential to lead to change, particularly in respect to pastoral practice.

In reflecting on these experiences, one inherent difficulty I identified lay in working with recent, and local, experiences, the temporal proximity of which would make it difficult, if not impossible, to define an appropriate 'envelope' (i.e. before/after conditions) for any possible case studies. Furthermore, since, in my experience, issues tended to be emotive I was concerned that such exploration may re-ignite strong feelings and prove destructive. An alternative was needed, drawing on

examples that could be approached calmly and with a degree of objectivity/detachment on the part of any individuals or congregations involved.

Where might they be found?

The programme of ongoing study required by the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) for all Newly Accredited Ministers (NAM) gave me the opportunity to investigate a hunch that historical materials might be suitable for this purpose. I first examined the *English Baptists*²⁴⁸ series of books, identifying issues that had arisen in the past (see Appendix I)²⁴⁹, which indicated there was, potentially, a rich source of material upon which to reflect. However, as mediated via these secondary sources the information was very limited, being almost an aside to the main trajectory; only by exploring examples of primary source material was it possible to ascertain whether the potential I sought might be realised.

Inspired by the work of Goadby²⁵⁰, a late 19th century Baptist historian, I selected two 17th/18th century examples for further exploration, hymn-singing²⁵¹ and

²⁴⁸ J.H.Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot, Oxfordshire: The Baptist Historical Society, 1994); R. Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century* (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1986); B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the 17th Century*, Second ed. (Oxford: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996). NB At this stage the twentieth century volume had not been published, but the temporal proximity of issues would have been relevant in considering the suitability of this material for reflection.

²⁴⁹ The twentieth century volume is omitted for reasons as noted above

²⁵⁰ J.J. Goadby, *Byepaths in Baptist History, a Collection of Interesting, Instructive and Curious Information Not Generally Known, Concerning the Baptist Denomination* (London: 1871).

²⁵¹ B. Keach, *An Answer to Mr Marlow's Appendix* (London: John Hancock, reprint Kessinger 2005, 1691); B. Keach, *The Breach Repaired in God's Worship; or Singing of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs Proved to Be an Ordinance of Christ*. (London: John Hancock, reprint by Kessinger 2005, 1691); I. Marlow, *The Controversy of Singing Brought to an End or a Treatise in Three Parts* (London: 1696); I. Marlow, *A Postscript: In Answer Farther to a Book Entituled, Folly Detected, Published by Mr Joseph Wright; and a Paper Called, An Appendix or Brief Answer to Mr Marlow's Notion of the Essence of Singing, by T W and to a Paper Called an Answer to a Brief Discourse Concerning Singing* (London: 1692); I. Marlow, *Preprinted Forms of Praising God Vocally Sung by All the Church Together Proved to Be No Gospel Ordinance in a Sober Discourse Concerning Singing* (London: 1691); I. Marlow, *Truth Soberly Defended. In a Serious Reply to Mr Benjamin Keach's Book Intituled "The Breach Repaired in God's Worship; or Singing of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, Proved to Be an Ordinance of Christ"* (London: 1692); D. Taylor, *Dissertation on*

endogamy²⁵², and studied original published documents in an endeavour to identify how issues had been approached and arguments developed. This exercise provided a number of valuable insights. Firstly, I was successful in discovering evidence of sophisticated approaches to reflecting on complex issues, e.g. how is singing defined; who may be permitted to lead congregational singing; must he/she be a church member (equated to being a ‘believer’); is it permissible for non-Christians to join in with singing; what happens if a non-believer starts to sing? Secondly, contemporary parallels and resonances were clear, e.g. who may a Christian be permitted to marry; what issues of doctrine or practice cannot be negotiated or compromised in considering marriage partners; what balance of discipline and pastoral concern is appropriate for those who fail to comply? The potential value of the resources seemed enormous – but there was an obvious problem: accessibility; the few extant copies of these works are held in specialist libraries and can only be viewed by prior arrangement. Since local congregations are unable to access original documents, and since most publicly available histories barely touch these issues, how can the potential be shared? To explore this, I enrolled on the DPT programme, which offered a helpful framework. The portfolio requirements of the first part of the programme – the literature review and the publishable article -

Singing in the Worship of God, Interspersed with Occasional Strictures on Mr Boyce's Late Tract, Entitled 'Serious Thoughts on the Mode and Practice of Singing in the Public Worship of God' (London: J Buckland, 1786); D. Taylor, *A Second Dissertation on Singing in the Worship of God, Introduced with Two Letters to the Revd Mr Gilbert Boyce* (London: J Buckland, 1787); Whitley, *Minutes of the General Assembly of General Baptists, Volume I* (London: Kingsgate, 1909); Whitley, *Minutes of the General Assembly of General Baptists, Volume II* (London: Kingsgate, 1909); W.T. Whitley, *Congregational Hymn Singing* (London: Dent, 1933); W.T. Whitley, *History of British Baptists* (London: C Griffin and Co., 1923).

²⁵² J. Caffyn, *Sussex Believers: Baptist Marriage in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Worthing: Christian Publishing, 1988); J. Griffith, *The Unlawfulness of Mixt-Marriages or an Answer to the Book Entitled Mixt Marriages Vindicated in a Dialogue between a and B Written by Stephen Tory in a Friendly Discourse between E and F* (London: 1681); S. Tory, *Mixt Marriages Vindicated or a Discourse of Mixt Marriages by Way of a Dialogue between a and B Who Are of the Same Profession in Matters of Religion but of Different Apprehensions in the Point of Marriage* (London: 1640); Whitley, *Minutes of the General Assembly of General Baptists, Volume I*; Whitley, *Minutes of the General Assembly of General Baptists, Volume II*.

proved excellent vehicles *both* for establishing the ‘niche’ for my work *and* confirming my sense that the potential for denominational history as a resource in this way is largely untapped. As a result of the work undertaken I have clarified my research question, namely “*how can English Baptist denominational history be used as a resource for theological reflection, specifically in the area of church health?*”

This chapter describes how I will set about answering that question.

The Context of Research

Recognition of its context is fundamental to my research, which is inspired by the experiences of Baptist churches in membership with the BUGB, and the primary sources employed to date emerge from forerunners of that denomination²⁵³. Like all Christian traditions, Baptists have a number of distinctive features that set them apart from others and this needs to be recognised in setting the boundaries to my work. Baptist ecclesiology, notably local autonomy and congregational governance, is a very significant factor affecting the way in which issues are addressed and the influence which can be brought to bear from outside the local congregation should things go wrong. Whilst valuable insights could be gleaned from other traditions and organisations, the distinctiveness of local congregations handling complex issues, and being helpfully resourced to do so, is central to my work. Thus, the context is the churches of the BUGB, i.e. primarily English Baptist churches²⁵⁴, and the historical resources I will employ arise from within that experience.

²⁵³ Baptist Unions are a relatively recent development and the churches in membership with them often predate the organisations of which they are a part. Also, Baptists are often uncomfortable with the word ‘denomination’ stressing that they are a ‘union’ of churches held together in a covenant relationship; churches enter and leave the BUGB fairly regularly and whilst most have a long term commitment to the union there is some sense of fluidity about the whole. The word ‘denomination’ is used as useful shorthand understood within other Christian traditions and pertinent to the type of history that is being considered.

²⁵⁴ There are a number of BUGB churches in both South and North Wales and three in Scotland. Most of these have dual membership, being also in membership of the Baptist Union of Wales (BUW) or the Baptist Union of Scotland (BUS) as appropriate. A significant proportion of Welsh churches belong only to BUW and most Scottish churches only to BUS. The historical records and

Context is equally relevant when considering work in the area of church health. The majority of Church Health literature and methods originates in the USA²⁵⁵ and, inevitably reflects the presuppositions of North American experience. The seminal work is the *Handbook for Congregational Studies*²⁵⁶ whose authors recognise the importance of local, congregational history, as recalled by members, to a church's self-understanding. By contrast, works published in the UK, such as *The Healthy Churches Handbook*²⁵⁷ make little or no reference to history, local or otherwise, having instead a very clear present-day focus; there is a clear opportunity to develop UK work to embrace insights from history. A final observation on context is that there is very little distinctively Baptist work in the area of church health²⁵⁸, most being 'borrowed' from other traditions; my work offers a necessary corrective to this.

The Aim and Usefulness of the Research

The long-term and principal aim of my research is to identify a means of making available historical resources that will assist members of Baptist congregations to reflect theologically in areas where there is potential for change, especially in aspects of local pastoral practice. Initial explorations revealed that accessibility was crucial

publications reflect these geographical factors and there are differences, be they often quite subtle, between the operations of the three unions.

²⁵⁵ For example, N.T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997); N.T. Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998); P.E. Becker, *Congregations in Conflict, Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); J.W. Carroll, Dudley C.S., and McKinney W., *Handbook for Congregational Studies* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986); C.S. Dudley and Ammerman N.T., *Congregations in Transition: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing and Adapting in Changing Communities* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002); C.S. Dudley et al., *Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies* (Westminster John Knox, 1991); J.H. Furr, Bonem M., and Herrington J., *Leading Congregational Change: Workbook* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

²⁵⁶ Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*.

²⁵⁷ R. Warren, *The Healthy Churches Handbook* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

²⁵⁸ A notable exception is an Australian publication which is essentially a 'how to' manual drawing on predominantly North American sources: *Fit4Life Manual*, (Hawthorn, Victoria: Baptist Union of Victoria, 2004).

in achieving this aim, both literal, physical access to resources and the ability to understand and engage creatively and critically with them²⁵⁹. In seeking to address this, insights from developments in historical method, outlined in my literature review²⁶⁰, will need to be investigated further to develop a more suitable approach for writing Baptist history. Another important factor, identified in my publishable article (and derived conference papers)²⁶¹, is the recovery of a distinctly spiritual/theological emphasis in what is written. My research project is therefore *methodological* – seeking to develop a new approach (or approaches) for ‘telling the story’ that will be accessible, appealing and ultimately useful to local Baptist congregations engaging in theological reflection in areas of church health.

There are potentially significant benefits in using historical resources creatively in this way, both as a tool for developing skills and as an adequately ‘safe’ resource for congregations in distress. The obvious advantage of historical material is distance, both chronologically and (hence) emotionally, allowing the user to engage with it critically and rationally. Furthermore, it is possible to identify an envelope (boundary) for any case studies: e.g. once Baptists did not sing hymns, now they do, how was that change negotiated?

An important assumption of my work is a Baptist ecclesiology in an English context.

Whilst 21st century English Baptist life is not identical with its 17th or 18th century

²⁵⁹ Exploration of issues related to accessibility is included in my reflective practice paper, C.J.M. Gorton, "Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: Reflective Practice: Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Reading and Writing within the Research Process," (University of Manchester, 2009).

²⁶⁰ C.J.M. Gorton, "Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: Literature Review," (University of Manchester, 2007).

²⁶¹ C.J.M. Gorton, "Doing Theology: History for the Health of the Church," in *Baptists Doing Theology* (Manchester: unpublished, 2008); C.J.M. Gorton, "Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: Publishable Article: Renewing the Vision : History for the Health of the Church," (University of Manchester, 2008); C.J.M. Gorton, "Renewing the Vision: History for the Health of the Church," in *Baptist Historical Society Centenary Conference* (Prague: 2008).

counterparts, there is sufficient congruence, such as ecclesiology and nationality, to allow comparisons to be made with adequate confidence.

The ways in which the research – and longer term the emergent resources – is useful is significant. Firstly, this approach to history will allow two distinct emphases to be identified, namely *process* and *content*, either or both of which may be helpful to a given situation. Identification of process allows the reader(s) to examine *how* a particular issue was approached and addressed and to explore how this or a similar method might be adopted for their own context. Consideration of content concentrates on the ‘*what*’ of an issue and may give a broader context for, and sense of proportion to, a contemporary issue. Understanding the interplay of ‘how’ and ‘what’ has potential to assist contemporary reflection as it holds in creative tension past, present and future: ‘how did we get here’ (connection with and appreciation of our history) and ‘where do we go now’ (future focus informed by insights gained).

Beyond its explicitly functional nature as a method for reflection, such an approach has a distinctly theological and pastoral dimension. To engage with the stories of past generations of Baptists who struggled with what faithful witness meant offers hope and encouragement – other people have trodden similar ground; we are not alone in our experiences. Further, there is potential for a greater sense of identity to be nurtured through such engagement: this is *our* story, these are *our* forebears, this is relevant to who *we* are now. Attitudes towards a sense of Baptist identity vary, some seeing it as vital (essential and lively) whilst others are at best ambivalent, at worst hostile; a greater knowledge of its origins and emergence would as a minimum inform and/or challenge such opinions.

Value and Originality

That my research has value within a specifically Baptist context I am quite clear²⁶²

but issues of wider value and transferability must also be considered. Whilst the distinctive Baptist focus of my research is very specific, the methods I intend to develop are generic and could be readily transferred across denominational and/or geographical boundaries, offering a valuable contribution in the fields both of church history and church health. It is therefore an important contribution within practical theology.

The original aspect of my work lies in its methodological approach, drawing together and developing insights from different academic disciplines, notably church health and history/historiography. The use of literary and narrative theory alongside insights from hermeneutics shapes an approach to considering how denominational history may be told in a way that better serves the purposes of theological reflection in local congregations. This is a new and explicitly practical and theological use of existing material.

Beyond its distinct originality in terms of method, my work builds on and develops the use of history within church health approaches developed in the USA by adding a wider, denominational dimension complimenting that obtained from explicitly local, remembered history.

Finally, and emerging from my work for the publishable article, an important aspect of my work is the recovery of an appropriate spiritual/theological dimension to

²⁶² My paper to the Baptist Historical Society Centenary Conference was circulated and discussed within that organisation where it was recognised as a valuable contribution to debate on the role of the organisation and the wider import of Baptist denominational history

denominational history writing. Whilst caution *is* needed to avoid unsubstantiated or inflammatory claims, theological and spiritual concepts should be evident in faith-based writing about faith groups, especially where it is to inform theological reflection.

Key Issues and Debates

In the foregoing discussion, the overarching approach to the research has been identified, i.e. that insights from practical theology and historiography will be employed to develop a new approach to writing Baptist denominational history so that its potential as a source for congregational theological reflection can be realised. This Section amplifies, necessarily briefly, the three strands to be explored and interwoven in achieving this.

Developments in Congregational Studies

Originating predominantly in North America, congregational studies is a wide-ranging field with growing significance for, and adaptation to, a UK context, as helpfully summarised by Guest et al²⁶³. Church health is the sub-division of this field within which my research is located; the contributions of a number of key voices are discussed in detail in my literature review,²⁶⁴ and summarised below.

The seminal *Handbook for Congregational Studies*²⁶⁵ identifies history as important in congregational reflection. Two approaches are employed – the development of an ‘as remembered’ timeline and the collection of a ‘guided’ oral history based on semi-structured interviews – and history seen as part of the congregation’s identity (*who*

²⁶³ M. Guest, Tusting K., and Woodhead L., *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post Christian Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2004).

²⁶⁴ Gorton, "Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: Literature Review."

²⁶⁵ Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*.

we are). The updated version of the *Handbook*²⁶⁶ retains the approach to history but reassigns it to context (*where* we are). Two other significant North American voices were identified, James Hopewell²⁶⁷ whose work recognises the importance of ‘parish story’ (and who makes some telling, if disparaging, remarks about much locally generated church history²⁶⁸) and Penny Becker²⁶⁹ whose work on conflict within congregations recognises, though does not develop, the role of history²⁷⁰. The predominant example of British work in this area, drawing on, adapting and complimenting North American work (using insights from Hopewell²⁷¹ and Wink²⁷²) but notably virtually excluding or ignoring history is *The Healthy Churches Handbook*²⁷³.

The recognition of the importance of history and the use of locally generated time lines and oral histories advocated by the North American writers is valuable, but there is scope for both critique and development. That, in later work, history has been moved from being part of identity to context inevitably impacts the way participants view and engage with the material developed. I view this as a retrograde step and would seek to reclaim the original categorisation as part of ‘identity’. A

²⁶⁶ Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*.

²⁶⁷ J.F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

²⁶⁸ He observes: ‘Many local church histories are written without reference to the elements that produce tensions and strains... concentrat[ing] instead on dates and accomplishments; they avoid the tension that accompanies the complicated struggle to maintain and enliven any community. Most local church histories are therefore boring.’ Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. Page 157

²⁶⁹ Becker, *Congregations in Conflict, Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*.

²⁷⁰ For example, references to resources ‘like sermons, annual reports, newsletters, minutes of meetings, bulletins and *histories*’ (emphasis mine) and that ‘[a]necdotal evidence suggests that congregational history is important...’ Becker, *Congregations in Conflict, Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*. Pages 4 and 188 respectively.

²⁷¹ Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*.

²⁷² W. Wink, *Engaging the Powers : Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992); W. Wink, *Naming the Powers : The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); W. Wink, *Unmasking the Powers : The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

²⁷³ Warren, *The Healthy Churches Handbook*.

further critique is the inherent partiality of the work – it is inevitably incomplete (what has been forgotten, overlooked, omitted?) and biased (why is this version told rather than another); further, it cannot help but be ‘living memory’, i.e. what is recalled and considered important by current members. In no way does this invalidate the endeavour, but inevitably constrains it; further valuable insights could be gained by engaging with a wider range of resources, specifically within a denominational perspective, e.g. how are we like or unlike other congregations?

Developments in Historical Method and Historiography

My literature review examined developments in historiography during the twentieth century²⁷⁴; from a well-defined and confident academic discipline, built on Modern principles of scientific objectivity and the concept of progress, emerged one more diverse, more tentative and more critically self-aware, consistent with an emerging Post-modern worldview. These insights, outlined below, will be explored further to develop a method for researching and producing resources suited to the purposes I envisage without either losing the rigour or ‘dumbing down’ the work of church historians.

The ‘rediscovery’ of narrative history²⁷⁵ signals a shift in emphasis, from the macroscopic focus of nations and numerical data to a microscopic viewpoint of small groups and individuals. Rather than feigning objectivity, such approaches recognise the inherent ‘story-telling’ nature of history. Instead of a *reconstruction* of the past, what is produced is a *construction*, an evidence-based, creative account which may

²⁷⁴ J. Appleby, Hunt L., and Jacob M., *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W W Norton and Company, 1994); G.G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

²⁷⁵ For example, L. Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past and Present* 85 (1979).

considered to lie on a continuum between an objective factual account and an historical novel: ‘historical narratives are verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found...’²⁷⁶ Such developments resonate with, endorse and inform my aim to find ways of using denominational history for theological reflection.

Complimenting, informing and critiquing narrative approaches to history are insights from literary methods. The work of contemporary philosophers such as Derrida²⁷⁷, Heidegger²⁷⁸, Ricoeur²⁷⁹ or Gadamer²⁸⁰ exploring concepts of meaning and both the power and provisionality of language potentially offer valuable checks and balances in considering not only what is said but why and how. Likewise the concepts of real, ideal and implied readers employed by Iser²⁸¹ offer a framework for considering both the purpose and style of writing employed and for critically reflecting on the likely intentions of materials produced.

The mid- and late-twentieth century saw wider accessibility of higher education to women and minority ethnic students which, alongside emerging feminist and liberation approaches to history (and theology), had an enormous impact on the discipline(s), challenging the white, male norm previously assumed. Revisionist histories re-examined and retold familiar stories from new perspectives and offered

²⁷⁶ Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*. Page 119

²⁷⁷ For example, initially via secondary works such as S. Sim, *Derrida and the End of History* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999).

²⁷⁸ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

²⁷⁹ For example, P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, D.P. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

²⁸⁰ For example, H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden, J.C. (London: Sheed and Ward Ltd, 1975).

²⁸¹ W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); W. Iser, *How to Do Theory* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); W. Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1974).

alternative understandings of events and groups. It was no longer feasible to say there was one definitive history; rather a range of histories (and, indeed, theologies) could be developed/constructed and defended; could the same be true for denominational history?

All historical work, whatever approach is employed and however the story is told, involves interpretation – a hermeneutic task – and there is a clear parallel with Biblical hermeneutics, which employs (among others) techniques similar to those outlined above. Insights from both Biblical and historical hermeneutics will be important to my work with denominational history, especially when handling primary sources.

Denominational History

Denominational history lies at the heart of my research, being the resource I assert has potential to offer resources for theological reflection; questions relating to its suitability for that purpose have inspired the work I propose to undertake.

My specific focus is the histories relating to the BUGB, a predominantly English context. There exist a number of overview histories ranging from Crosby's four-volume eighteenth century work²⁸² through various twentieth century single-volume

²⁸² T. Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists from the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of King George I: Their History from the End of the Reign of King Charles II to the End of the Glorious Reign of King William III of Immortal Memory*, 4 vols., vol. 3 (London: John Robinson, 1740; reprint, The Baptist Standard Bearer); T. Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists from the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of King George I: Their History from the End of the Reign of King William III to the Reign of King George I, Including Some Part of His Reign* 4vols., vol. 4 (London: John Robinson, 1740; reprint, The Baptist Standard Bearer Inc); T. Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists from the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of King George I: Their History from the Restoration of King Charles II to the End of His Reign*, 4 vols., vol. 2 (London: John Robinson, 1739; reprint, The Baptist Standard Bearer Inc); T. Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists from the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of King George I: Their*

works²⁸³ to the *English Baptists* series with four volumes each covering a specific century²⁸⁴. At an intermediate level are Association histories, written towards the end of the twentieth century, and any number of local books, leaflets and pamphlets produced by local congregations. Supplementing these general works, *The Baptist Quarterly*²⁸⁵, includes specialist essays on historical and theological topics. Finally, and crucial for my work, are the church books, minutes, pamphlets, books and tracts produced during the last four centuries.

Inevitably various publications reflect their 'age' and intended purpose. The majority of the twentieth century overview histories serve a largely didactic purpose, informing the essays of those seeking accreditation as Baptist ministers or lay preachers, focussing primarily on key figures and events, along with major doctrinal and ecclesiological distinctives. As a result they are unsuited to the purpose of local theological reflection. More promising is the primary material, such as the seventeenth century publications discussed earlier^{286,287}, with its clear emphasis on

History to the Restoration of King Charles II, 4 vols., vol. 1 (London: John Robinson, 1738; reprint, The Baptist Standard Bearer).

²⁸³ Notable examples include: J.C. Carlile, *The Story of the English Baptists* (London: James Clarke & Co, 1905); R. Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage*, Second ed. (Oxford: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2005); E.A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History* (London: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1958); A.C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Kingsgate, 1947).

For a wider, British perspective, the key writer is Whitley, *History of British Baptists*.

²⁸⁴ The *English Baptists* series: Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*; Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*; I.M. Randall, *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century* (Didcot, Oxfordshire: The Baptist Historical Society, 2005); White, *The English Baptists of the 17th Century*.

²⁸⁵ The journal of the Baptist Historical Society

²⁸⁶ Keach, *An Answer to Mr Marlow's Appendix*; Keach, *The Breach Repaired in God's Worship; or Singing of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs Proved to Be an Ordinance of Christ*; Marlow, *The Controversy of Singing Brought to an End or a Treatise in Three Parts*; Marlow, *A Postscript: In Answer Farther to a Book Entituled, Folly Detected, Published by Mr Joseph Wright; and a Paper Called, An Appendix or Brief Answer to Mr Marlow's Notion of the Essence of Singing, by T W and to a Paper Called an Answer to a Brief Discourse Concerning Singing*; Marlow, *Preprinted Forms of Praising God Vocally Sung by All the Church Together Proved to Be No Gospel Ordinance in a Sober Discourse Concerning Singing*; Marlow, *Truth Soberly Defended. In a Serious Reply to Mr Benjamin Keach's Book Intituled "The Breach Repaired in God's Worship; or Singing of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, Proved to Be an Ordinance of Christ"*.

theological consideration of pastoral issues. However, because such material is held in secure archives²⁸⁸, access is simply not possible for members of local churches and alternative means need to be found (whether by facsimile, transcription, or creative means such as dramatisation or film) to facilitate this.

Even if the issues of physical access can be overcome, work is needed to enable congregations to engage constructively and creatively with the material: the style and presentation need to reflect these aims and ensure, so far as possible, that linguistic access is also achieved. This complex issue, which I explored in relation to my own reading and writing in my reflective practice paper²⁸⁹, will be kept in mind throughout the research process, to ensure my aim to develop a method of writing Baptist history for use in theological reflection is met.

As noted earlier, a further factor I wish to explore is the recovery of a distinctive spiritual or theological tone to the story that is told. The avoidance of reference to divine activity in denominational history is understandable – claims that God acted in a certain way in a certain context cannot be proved or disproved - but the omission of any spiritual or theological language from the history of a faith-community seems equally deficient, especially when its use is to be explicitly theological. I believe

²⁸⁷ Griffith, *The Unlawfulness of Mixt-Marriages or an Answer to the Book Entituled Mixt Marriages Vindicated in a Dialogue between a and B Written by Stephen Tory in a Friendly Discourse between E and F*; Tory, *Mixt Marriages Vindicated or a Discourse of Mixt Marriages by Way of a Dialogue between a and B Who Are of the Same Profession in Matters of Religion but of Different Apprehensions in the Point of Marriage*.

²⁸⁸ The Angus Library in Oxford, the John Rylands Library (Deansgate) in Manchester and, especially with General Baptist works, the British Library in London

²⁸⁹ Gorton, "Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: Reflective Practice: Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Reading and Writing within the Research Process."

that recovery of an appropriate theological/spiritual dimension is important and exploration of how to so will form part of my work²⁹⁰.

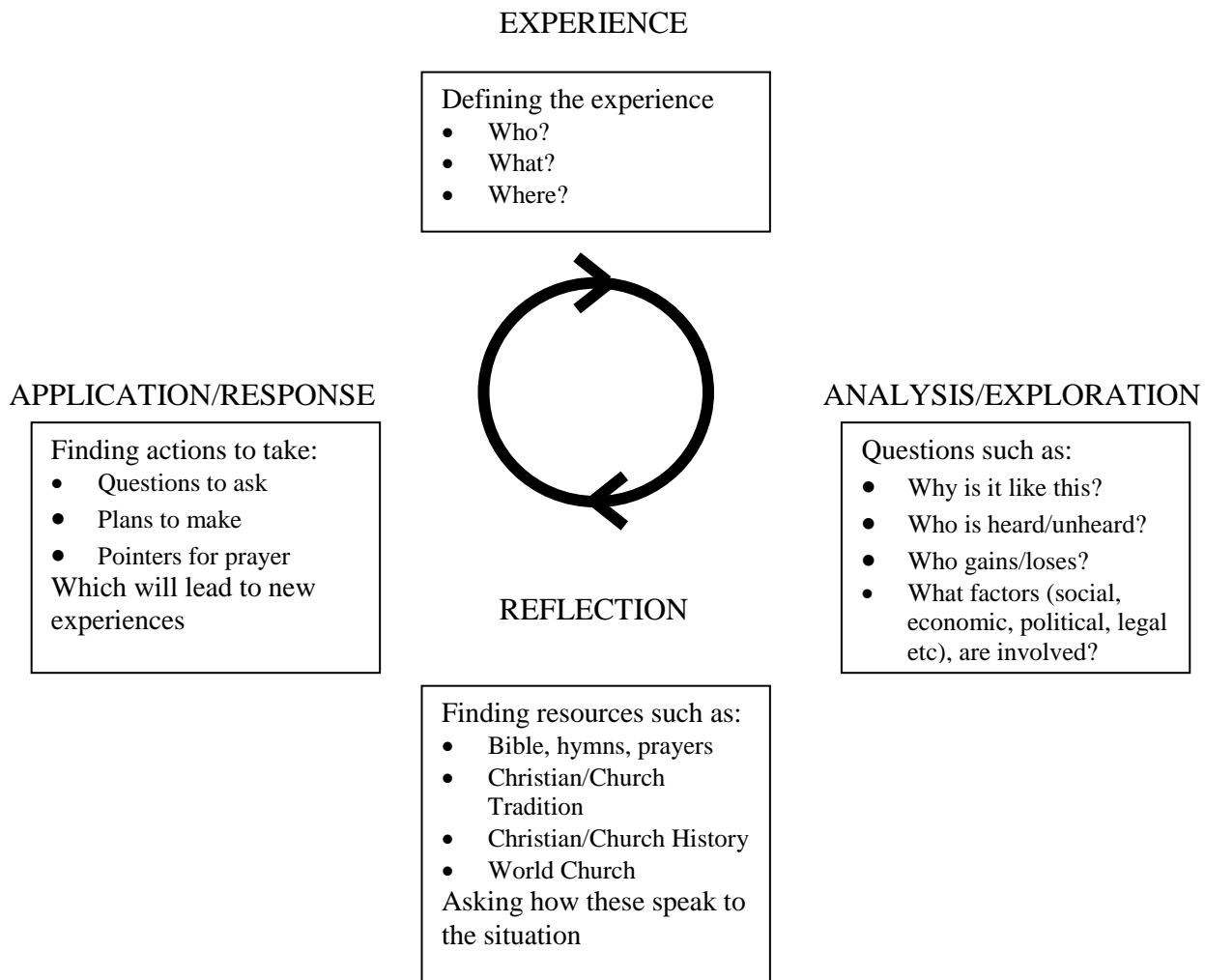
Methods and Rationale

My approach to this research is shaped by my training as a practical theologian and employs as an overarching framework a version of the pastoral or hermeneutic cycle developed from that popularised by Laurie Green²⁹¹ and shown diagrammatically below:

[next page]

²⁹⁰ There is an extensive literature in this area, however the following Baptist writers offer a useful starting point for exploration: R. Ellis, "God and History," *The Baptist Quarterly* 32 (1987-1988); P. Fiddes, "God and History," *The Baptist Quarterly* 30 (1983-1984).

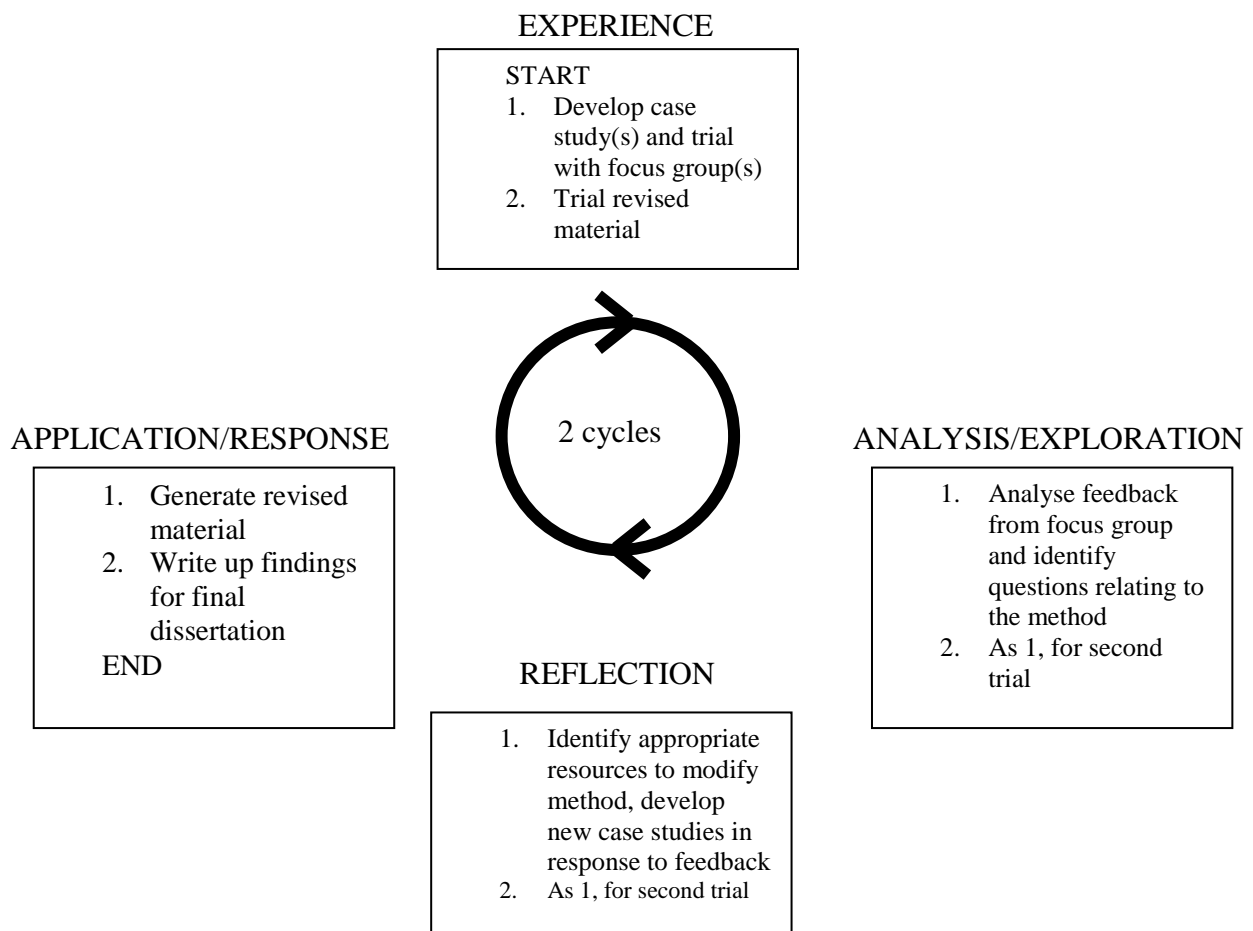
²⁹¹ L. Green, *Let's Do Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1990).



Already in this chapter I have outlined the background to my interest in this area of research. It seems reasonable to assert that my experiences in local churches, the questions raised, resources for reflection sought and decision to register on the DPT programme constitute an iteration of the pastoral cycle. It can also be argued that the literature review and the publishable article each constituted further cycles. Indeed, the continual, iterative or spiralling nature of the cycle is key to my identification of three possible alternative approaches to the next phase of the project, each of which is outlined below.

A Multi-Cycle Approach: Empirical Research

One approach is to undertake a programme of empirical research, working with focus groups to develop, refine and reflect upon a method in embryo, essentially undertaking plural (at least two) iterations of a pastoral cycle. Such an approach would be inherently practical, selecting one or more case studies, creating material and working with a selected group of participants to test its suitability and efficacy. Having reflected on the experience, adjustments to the material could be made and the process repeated with a small number of groups to test it further:

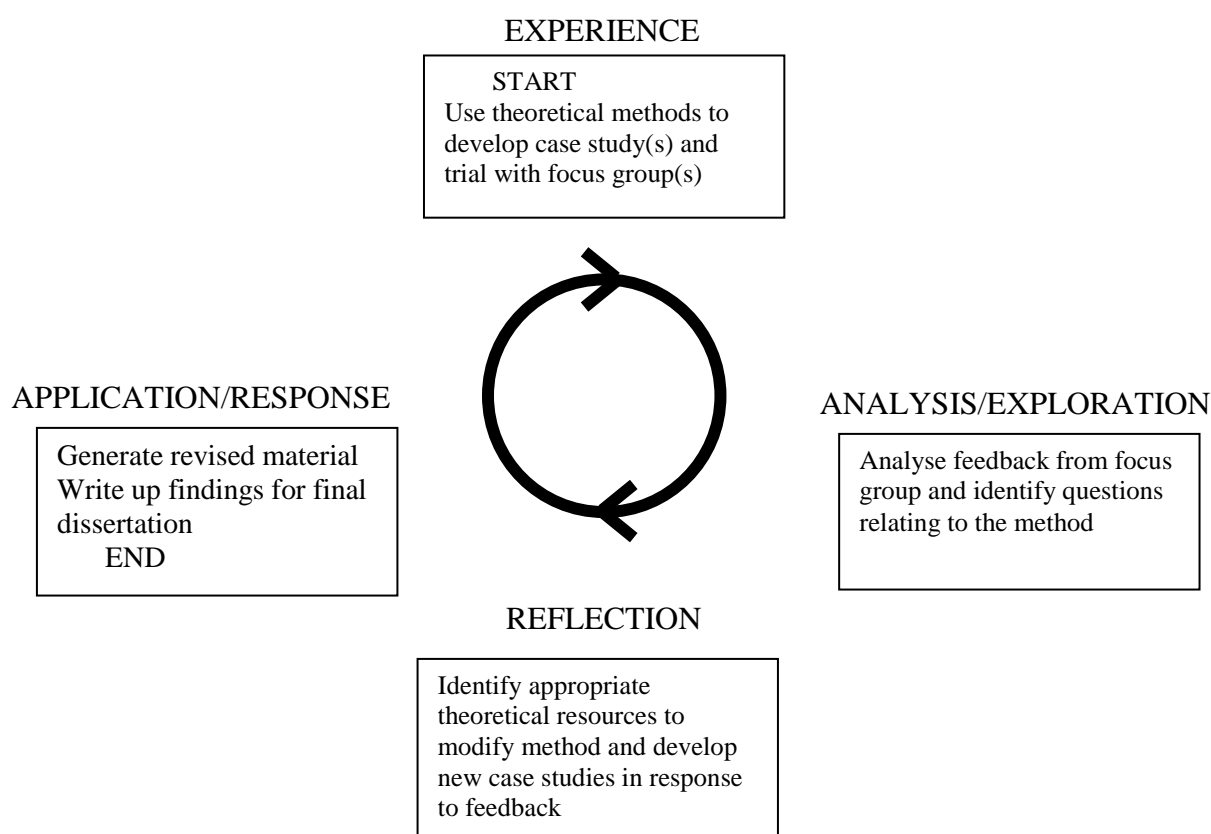


Notes:

Numbers refer to discrete iterations of the cycle: all items 1, in order, occur prior to items 2
 START refers to the beginning of the empirical work and END to the completion of the project

A Single Cycle Approach: Semi-Empirical Research using a Case Study

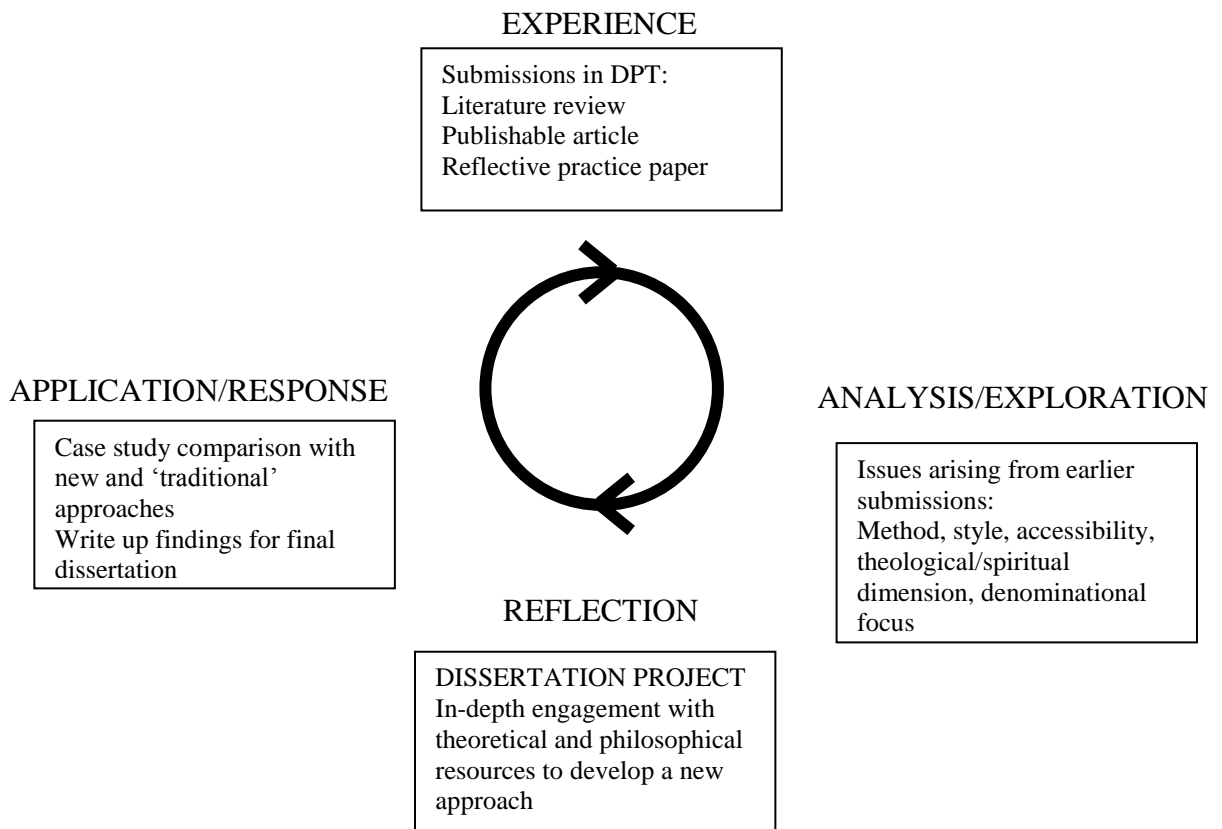
The first option would involve little or no further engagement with theory or historical method, but would centre on analysing and interpreting the results of trials. An alternative approach would be effectively a single cycle where a more theoretical approach was taken to develop and justify a case study or pack, which could then be trialled with a small number of focus groups.



Single Phase Approach: In Depth Reflection on Theory, Grounded by Example

A third option is a predominantly theoretical project, which would equate to a single 'reflection' phase of the pastoral cycle. The 'experience' of engaging in the literature review, preparing the publishable article and reflecting on my own practice has been 'analysed' giving rise to the research question. In order to answer that question, sustained in-depth engagement with methodologies for history writing, philosophy of hermeneutics/interpretation, literary and narrative theory alongside

critical engagement with current historical resources in order to identify an alternative approach is required – a single ‘reflection’ phase. In order to move towards ‘application’ a single case study illustrating the new approach would be developed and compared with the ‘traditional’ telling of the same issue or story.



This approach differs from the other two in that the final ‘practical’ test is not undertaken. Rather than being aimed at the ‘end-user’, this approach seeks to influence those who research and write Baptist history, often professional theologians or historians, who will be convinced by diligent academic research rather than the results of a handful of case-studies.

A Way Forward

To pursue any of the approaches outlined would be valuable and would add to the body of knowledge in practical theology. However, after careful consideration, I

have decided that this project will adopt the last of these and outline my reasons here.

Key to my decision is how to move my work from being an interesting research project that sits unread on library a shelf to something that is useful and used. Whilst the empirical options could potentially influence a small number of people at grass-roots level (which would be a valid reason for choosing them) the overall impact is likely to be greater if those who currently write Baptist history, most of whom are academic professionals eager to encourage greater engagement with their field, are convinced. Thus whilst the ‘end-user’ is the local congregation, this project needs to engage an audience of academics more readily persuaded by theoretical arguments than a few case studies. At the same time, by grounding my work in a comparative written case study, the practical outcome is demonstrated, rooting it firmly in field of practical theology.

Working within the key areas of practical theology and historical method outlined in Section 3 above, my work will revisit and develop the ideas identified in the publishable article. Drawing on insights from literary²⁹², narrative²⁹³ and hermeneutic theory²⁹⁴ to consider the aims, style and language employed in developing historical materials suitable to assist theological reflection, it will explore how ‘history is a set of stories we tell in order to understand better who we are and

²⁹² Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*; Iser, *How to Do Theory*; Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*.

²⁹³ H. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); H.V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973).

²⁹⁴ For example, M.A. Rae, *History and Hermeneutics* (London: T&T Clark, 2005); J.N. Hartt, "Theology as a Hermeneutical Salvaging of History," *New Literary History* 17, no. 2 (1986); C.E. Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics*, *New Directions in Theology Today* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968).

the world we're in.'²⁹⁵ As previously noted, recognising that denominational history is the story of people who believe that God is active in human experience, it will seek to find an appropriate means of recovering spiritual/ theological aspects of the story²⁹⁶, what may be termed 'glimpses of God'²⁹⁷. A complex area within a largely *sola scriptura* tradition will be to draw together insights on pedagogy and learning styles with issues of authority in order to locate denominational history in a 'canon' of resources employed to challenge hearts and minds²⁹⁸. Finally, one of the challenges for all Christians (strictly for all people) is being part of the story, shaping and being shaped by it – i.e. issues of embeddedness and identity; philosophical explorations around meaning and identity will assist in considering how this may be helpfully explored and addressed²⁹⁹.

Specific Limitations and General Considerations

My thesis – that denominational history has potential to be a valuable resource for theological reflection – is wide-ranging and limits must be identified and justified for the project undertaken, both in terms of method and focus. I now consider the specificity of my work, a distinct subset of Baptist experience, before setting it in the wider context to which it contributes.

²⁹⁵ R. Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005). Page 1

²⁹⁶ For example, Ellis, "God and History."; Fiddes, "God and History."; P.S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Paternoster, 2003).

²⁹⁷ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*. Page 3

²⁹⁸ Mainly this will be an extension of work on literary and narrative methods, but will also need to look at some aspects of education and pedagogy, such as: P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Continuum, 1994); P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Ramos, M.B. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985); J.M. Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning* (London: SCM, 1991).

²⁹⁹ For example, Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; Heidegger, *Being and Time*; Ricoeur????, *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

Specificity

Church history is an enormous, diverse field, embracing denominational and mission history and spanning almost two millennia of experience; whilst insights from the wider field are valuable (and are employed in some of the early Baptist work³⁰⁰) attention must be clearly focussed to make the project tenable. One challenge in my work is to manage creatively the tension between practicability and partiality: awareness of its limitation is as important as its potential. Hence, I have chosen to focus on Baptist denominational history, specifically excluding Baptist mission history³⁰¹.

The location of my work in a Baptist context arises from my experience as part of a Baptist faith community and specifically as an ordained Baptist minister. Like other Christian traditions, Baptists have their own idiosyncrasies and emphases, which shape their practices, irrespective of how well these are understood or articulated.

Use of the word ‘denomination’ in relation to Baptists is, as already noted, cautious³⁰² but is a widely recognised term that reflects the kind of material in which

³⁰⁰ R. Allen, *An Essay to Prove Singing of Psalms with Conjoin'd Voices a Christian Duty and to Resolve Doubts Concerning It* (London: John Harris, 1696); Keach, *An Answer to Mr Marlow's Appendix*; Keach, *The Breach Repaired in God's Worship; or Singing of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs Proved to Be an Ordinance of Christ*; Marlow, *The Controversy of Singing Brought to an End or a Treatise in Three Parts*; Marlow, *A Postscript: In Answer Farther to a Book Entitled, Folly Detected, Published by Mr Joseph Wright; and a Paper Called, An Appendix or Brief Answer to Mr Marlow's Notion of the Essence of Singing, by T W and to a Paper Called an Answer to a Brief Discourse Concerning Singing*; Marlow, *Preprinted Forms of Praising God Vocally Sung by All the Church Together Proved to Be No Gospel Ordinance in a Sober Discourse Concerning Singing*; Marlow, *Truth Soberly Defended. In a Serious Reply to Mr Benjamin Keach's Book Intituled "The Breach Repaired in God's Worship; or Singing of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, Proved to Be an Ordinance of Christ"*; Taylor, *Dissertation on Singing in the Worship of God, Interspersed with Occasional Strictures on Mr Boyce's Late Tract, Entitled 'Serious Thoughts on the Mode and Practice of Singing in the Public Worship of God'*; Taylor, *A Second Dissertation on Singing in the Worship of God, Introduced with Two Letters to the Revd Mr Gilbert Boyce*.

³⁰¹ The significance of Baptists in the history of modern mission is enormous, however, mission history is not concerned with the life of local congregations in a British (English) context or the pastoral issues that beleaguer those I have worked with, and, whilst it may offer valuable insights, it is explicitly excluded from my work.

³⁰² Baptist structures consist of associations, unions, conventions, federations and alliances. There is no worldwide Baptist communion (c.f. Anglicanism or Roman Catholicism for example) and no

I am interested. In identifying the boundary of my work, and reflecting the churches in which my experience has occurred, I have chosen to concentrate on material associated with the BUGB, which is one of the many Baptist groupings in the British Isles, consisting primarily of churches in England and North Wales, parts of South Wales, three churches in Scotland and one in Spain³⁰³. The diversity of Baptist expression within a broadly British context inevitably impacts the story that is told; BUGB history predominantly reflects experiences within English Baptist churches, which becomes significant when considering wider applicability of my work.

A long-standing characteristic of Baptists is a suspicion of creeds, declarations of faith or doctrinal statements, something reflected in the Declaration of Principle that unites the BUGB. The first clause of this declaration, with its emphases on the location of authority, the liberty of the local congregation and the role of scripture, is especially relevant to my work:

That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute *authority* in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has *liberty*, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.³⁰⁴ (Emphasis mine)

single international authority to which all others are accountable, rather local churches and geographical or theological groups voluntarily enter covenant relationships with larger organisations.

³⁰³ Source: B.U.o.G. Britain, *2009 Directory* (Didcot, Oxfordshire: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2009).

³⁰⁴ "Baptist Union of Great Britain, Declaration of Principle,"

http://baptist.org.uk/baptist_life/what_is_a_baptist/dec_of_principle.html. 23rd July 2009

It is noted that minor word changes were approved at the Baptist Assembly May 2009 but have not yet appeared in public documents.

Whilst membership of the Union is valued, Baptists are keen to assert their liberty and locate little or no authority in its structures; local autonomy is often prized over wider interdependence. Ironically the liberty they enjoy allows Baptists to become isolated from their heritage with resultant loss of identity and confusion of, e.g., evangelicalism or charismatic expression with what it means to be Baptist. This is exacerbated by another facet of Baptist tradition, an emphasis on scripture as the only authoritative resource (albeit technically under Christ) – the *sola scriptura* intent easily slides into unthinking Biblicism and an attitude that ‘Baptists don’t do tradition’ (c.f. e.g. the Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason and experience). Among the challenges of my work is that of engaging creatively with a faith tradition that is at best ambivalent towards its history and is suspicious of resources other than scripture to inform its reflection. My intention in choosing to focus on explicitly Baptist history is that the impact of this inherent ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ towards all things non-biblical is reduced.

Even within the scope of Baptist history, the range is enormous; at one extreme are the booklets and pamphlets produced by local congregations, at the other the large-scale overview histories researched by professionals. My work seeks to identify a body of *primary* sources for discrete issues of local and pastoral practice from which a suitable case study can be selected, since these relate more directly to issues faced by local congregations. Specifically I am interested early examples occurring within the context of, or usually attributed to, General Baptists³⁰⁵. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, in focusing on 17th/18th century examples the worldview of

³⁰⁵ It is noted that some of the issues in which I am interested are attributed to General Baptists even when they were clearly real for Particular Baptists at or around the same time. A good example is the hymn-singing debate where the most readily accessible primary sources are all by Particular Baptist authors.

Modernity is less influential than with later material; this is relevant and helpful for a Post-modern context where Modern assumptions of progress and objectivity no longer hold. Secondly, I believe the General Baptists receive a ‘bad press,’ either being dismissed as uneducated and unintelligent or as heretics who slid into Unitarianism. The recovery of a General Baptist voice offers an important corrective to a story dominated by a single perspective, allowing at least some of these assumptions to be challenged. Lastly, having served as minister of a (New Connexion) General Baptist Church³⁰⁶ dating from ~1749 it is in some senses ‘my story’ and allows me to incarnate part of what I am exploring.

Generality

So far discussion has focussed on the specificity of my work, but it must also be located within a wider general context. The outcomes of work, in terms of approach to researching and writing history should prove more widely applicable within the field of church health and church history. Whilst some adaptation would be needed for other traditions or cultures, the essential ideas and outcomes will be transferable.

Within the field of church health, my work will enhance and extend the role of history in congregational studies, augmenting the insights that can be gained from locally generated times lines and oral histories and offering congregations a new kind of resource to assist their reflective processes.

In the context of church history, my work operates at a number of levels. Primarily it is a methodological exercise aimed at convincing those who write denominational

³⁰⁶ The Constitution of the church explicitly defines it as a General Baptist Church, "Hugglescote Baptist Church, Constitution," (undated).

history of a new approach that will employ primary sources to develop resources that are accessible and valuable to local congregations engaged in theological reflection.

A subsidiary outcome is effectively a revisionist approach to exploring history of the English General Baptists, offering a valuable corrective to received wisdom.

Outcomes and Resources

The project will run over a period of approximately three academic years, with the first two being devoted to the in-depth literature-based theoretical work and the final year to development of the case study and finalising the dissertation report. As a result, it is not appropriate to develop a research timetable per se; however, good time management and interim targets for specific foci will be essential to successful completion and an indicative programme of work is outlined in Appendix II.

Resources – Areas to Explore

As my research is primarily theoretical it will involve sustained engagement with ‘key voices’ in the academy, as discussed and outlined in previous sections of this chapter, though there is potential to engage with other genres such as poetry or fiction and indeed with other media, such as film or museums³⁰⁷ if such avenues appear fruitful.

Central to my research will be in depth study of theoretical works in literary theory (e.g. Iser³⁰⁸) and literary approaches to history (e.g. Hayden White³⁰⁹), hermeneutics

³⁰⁷ For example, in response to the work of authors such as Tamsin Spargo: T. Spargo, *Reading the Past, Readers in Cultural Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000).

³⁰⁸ Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*; Iser, *How to Do Theory*; Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*.

³⁰⁹ White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*; White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*.

(e.g. including Braaten³¹⁰ and Rae³¹¹), theologies of history (including, from Baptist perspectives, Fiddes and Ellis³¹²) issues around identity and embeddedness (including autoethnography³¹³) and aspects of philosophy (e.g. Gadamer, Ricoeur, Heidegger, and Derrida³¹⁴). As well as academic historiography, alternative approaches to ‘telling’ history will need to be considered, since these may overcome issues of accessibility and reluctance, for example film/drama/‘reconstruction’³¹⁵, living history and museums³¹⁶. Questions of pedagogy³¹⁷ and adult Christian education³¹⁸ will need to be explored alongside insights from educational methods and practices. Consideration of contemporary approaches to teaching history in schools, colleges and universities, taking account of learning styles may offer valuable insights and dispel unhelpful presuppositions and will be pursued if judged appropriate.

Using sources for English Baptist history suitable examples for case studies will be identified and one of these selected for inclusion in this project. Major secondary works, e.g. the *English Baptists*³¹⁹ series, and overview works³²⁰ as well as the

³¹⁰ Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics*.

³¹¹ Rae, *History and Hermeneutics*. Correct title?

³¹² Ellis, "God and History."; Fiddes, "God and History."; Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*.

³¹³ C. Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*, Ethnographic Alternatives Book Series (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004); K. Etherington, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Using Ourselves in Research* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2004).

³¹⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; Heidegger, *Being and Time*; Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*; Sim, *Derrida and the End of History*.

³¹⁵ A recent Baptist example would be the BMS DVD portraying Thomas Helwys, a critique of which would be valuable. The use of historical drama

³¹⁶ Spargo, *Reading the Past*.

³¹⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*; Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*; Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Spargo, *Reading the Past*.

³¹⁸ Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning*.

³¹⁹ Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*; Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*; Randall, *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century*; White, *The English Baptists of the 17th Century*.

³²⁰ Carlile, *The Story of the English Baptists*; Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists from the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of King George I: Their History from the End of the Reign*

specialist essays of the *Baptist Quarterly* will provide the ‘story as traditionally told’.

Access to primary resources will be more challenging and will include original books, tracts, pamphlets and church books, sourced via Angus Library (Particular Baptists), John Rylands library (JRULM and Deansgate) and British Library (especially for General Baptist sources). An important human resource will be key Baptist historians and thinkers whose advice, critique and insights will be sought to hone my work³²¹

Outcome – Provisional Structure

An indicative outline for the dissertation, with provisional chapter/sections is as follows:

1 Introduction and Background

A narrative account of how the work emerged from experience

Report structure

2 In-depth Methodological Work (the order of presentation and scope of discussion will be finalised towards the end of the project)

Readers and writers (literary theory)

Understanding and interpreting (hermeneutics)

God in the story (theology/spirituality)

Our story (identity and embeddedness)

of King Charles II to the End of the Glorious Reign of King William III of Immortal Memory; Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists from the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of King George I: Their History from the End of the Reign of King William III to the Reign of King George I, Including Some Part of His Reign*

; Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists from the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of King George I: Their History from the Restoration of King Charles II to the End of His Reign*; Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists from the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of King George I: Their History to the Restoration of King Charles II*; Goadby, *Byepaths in Baptist History, a Collection of Interesting, Instructive and Curious Information Not Generally Known, Concerning the Baptist Denomination*; Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage*; Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History*.

³²¹ Examples would include, but are not limited to, Revd Dr Ian Randall, Revd Professor Paul Fiddes, Revd Dr Rob Ellis, Revd Dr Derek Murray, Dr David Bebbington.

Educational transformation (pedagogy, learning styles and educational methods; questions of authority)

Telling the story for this purpose – a proposed approach for researching and presenting case studies

3 Case study

Rationale for selection

The story as ‘traditionally’ told

A new, old story – retelling for this purpose

4 Discussion, Reflection and Conclusion

A new approach to denominational history

A contribution to practical theology, notably church health

Reflections at the end of the process

New questions to explore/further work

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter discusses the rationale, methods and limitations of my research proposal, which is to answer the question ‘*how can English Baptist denominational history be used as a resource for theological reflection, specifically in the area of church health?*’ The outcome of my work, which will be presented in the form of a dissertation, will be a method for writing Baptist denominational history in a way that allows local congregations to engage with it in this way, firmly rooted in contemporary theory and grounded in a specific case-study. This work will provide a valuable and original contribution to the fields of church health and church history.

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Chapter 6 – In Lieu of a Conclusion

Experience – Change Happens

It is now more than a decade since my interest in how Baptist churches manage, or mismanage, change began. In that time a lot has changed, because change is inevitable, and in this closing chapter I reflect on how change has affected my research and led to this submission.

At the time I registered for the research programme, I was minister of a very small Baptist church faced with the closure of its building and wondering where its future lay. Over the next three years the congregation approached change with tenacity and courage, trying new things, letting go of old things and endeavouring to reach new people. Despite their hard work and strong faith, numbers declined (due largely to deaths), finances were squeezed and I was given notice to terminate my pastorate on financial grounds. Over the next few months I met with a number of different churches to explore whether any of these might be the place to which I was 'called.' To my astonishment, I was invited to meet a church in Scotland and in October 2009 was the first ordained woman Baptist minister to be appointed to pastoral charge of a Baptist Church within the Baptist Union of Scotland³²². Like it not, I was now part of official Baptist history!

The move to Scotland, and adjustment to a new context, inevitably impacted my work and caused me to review my intention to focus on English Baptist history – was this still justified? Because my aim was ultimately methodological, I concluded

³²² There is some evidence of a 'lay' woman in pastoral charge of a Baptist church in Scotland in the early twentieth century and there is a small number of ordained Baptist women serving within the BUS as chaplains or associate ministers; until my appointment a woman in (sole) pastoral charge in a Scottish Baptist church was, for many, unthinkable and for others an impossible dream.

that this focus was still valid but that it would be useful, at a later date, to examine Scottish Baptist historical writing both to gain a better appreciation of the context in which I am now working and to identify more appropriate examples of changes in practice. There is a danger of seeing 'English' as normative for 'British' in a way that not only angers Scots but also overlooks potentially rich resources from a different strand of Baptist experience³²³.

I continued to concentrate on the theoretical aspects of my research and in summer 2010 presented a short paper on reading within an interpretive community to the Professional Doctorate Summer School in Chester (see Appendix III). In this rather playful essay, I drew on insights from literary theory, history of reading and personal experience to develop a postulate of a 'corporate ideal reader' for whom resources might be written – i.e. recognising that the 'target audience' is no mere passive recipient but an active body that needs to be inspired to move from reading, and even discussing, to absorbing and enacting what is discovered.

Practical Theology should be rooted in life and shaped by life, it must be willing to face the unexpected, and for this reason I believe it is justified to bring the personal into the academic at this point. At the end of August 2010 I was diagnosed with cancer and faced with an extensive treatment process lasting many months and which, if successful carries a 'best' prognosis of an 80% chance of five year survival. Such knowledge forces prioritisation, both in the short term, as treatment and

³²³ Some Scottish Baptist churches have their origins in 'English' practice, having been established by English 'missionaries' but many are indigenous and reflect their emergence from a predominantly Presbyterian rather than Anglican milieu. Even today there is a strength of Calvinistic theology rarely seen in English Baptist churches.

convalescence take place, and in the longer term as the 'what ifs' must be faced.

Many different questions arise, as outlined below.

Analysis – What Now? What If?

A good Practical Theologian will always keep in mind the need to question the continuation of the work s/he is involved with. Is this just self-serving indulgence or does it have genuine worth? What difference will it actually make if I pursue this rather than that? How does this research enable real people to live as faithful disciples?

When this Practical Theologian found her world shaken, she was forced to ask both questions that are particular and personal and questions that are general and wide-ranging. This section of the submission deliberately pushes the boundaries of academic writing because, perforce, the key questions are not academic but personal. At its most brutal, the central question becomes "if I have only five years (or less) how is that time best employed?" From this emerges a second question "where does my research fit?" At its most optimistic, the central question becomes "if my treatment and convalescence takes around a year, how does that impact life in the meantime?" From this the subsidiary question becomes "if I interrupt my research work for a year, what impact will that have?" Whether the optimistic or pessimistic line of questioning is followed, the eventual question is "what now for my research?" What if I interrupt it – what if in a year's time I am not able to resume work? What if I terminate it – what is the value of what has been achieved and how can it be employed? Reflection on these questions became the final part of my work and is described below.

Reflection

Where does my research fit now? This simple question is ambiguous – does it mean "where does it fit in relation to my life" or "where does it fit in relation to a research qualification" or "where does it fit in relation to Practical Theology" or "where does it fit in relation to Baptist history writing" or even "where does it fit in relation to Baptists reflecting theologically on issues of change". It means each of these, and in endeavouring to answer the questions, I seek to find an appropriate way forward for my work.

Firstly, in relation to my life. I found it surprisingly easy to make a decision to conclude my research, because in the light of personal circumstances it was no longer a priority. However, even that choice requires reflection, and that reflection inevitably relates to the other questions. I entered the research process convinced that the area I was exploring had real potential in helping local congregations achieve more 'healthy' practices – my work had importance. By nature I am not a quitter, indeed as an 'implementer-completer' failure is not an option – I needed to be sure that my decision was not just 'giving up'. It seemed better to me to draw to a conclusion the work I had completed rather than to leave it in abeyance and maybe never finish it... so to do would be to waste what had been achieved. Having made the decision to conclude my work, it became essential that its outcomes found proper expression, in the areas of Practical Theology, Baptist History writing and Baptist life.

In the area of Practical Theology, an academic discipline, my work represents an important contribution demonstrating how sophisticated theoretical engagement can securely underpin the more empirical and experiential approaches more frequently

adopted. I have held in tension throughout themes of accessibility and academic worth, of theory and practice, personal and public, and believe that by submitting my work to the academy as an MPhil thesis its value is affirmed. A by-product of my participation in the programme is that my ideas have been disseminated to, and informed by, other Practical Theologians, contributing more widely to the field.

My contribution to the thoughts of Baptist history writers is demonstrated by the inclusion of a version of my publishable article (Chapter 3) in a collection of essays celebrating the centenary of the Baptist Historical Society (to be published), however there is still much work to be achieved in this area. There are many avenues worthy of further exploration, but three seem to be of particular import:

- Appreciation and employment of contemporary approaches to history writing, recognising the limitations of the "progress" model that is seen in much twentieth century writing.
- A creative exploration of how a more overtly theological telling of history can be achieved, taking account both of best practice in historical research and the belief that God is somehow active in human history.
- Creative approaches to making resources available, including facsimile texts, story, drama, film etc. that will allow 'ordinary people' to engage with them. The plethora of 'popular history' programmes on television in recent years suggests such approaches might be very attractive.

Finally, in terms of local congregations handling change, it will be the work of others to transform my ideas into reality in any context beyond my own. I firmly believe that the work I have undertaken has shaped my own approach in helping two

congregations face very challenging changes, both practical and pastoral. Enabling people to see how understanding their past can inform their present and influence their future for the better, if only in two places, demonstrates the worth of my work.

Action/Response

The work of the Practical Theologian is never complete, as each cycle of reflection leads to new actions, new ideas, new hope and dreams, new prayers, new experiences and new questions. For me, this specific process ends here – at least for the foreseeable future – but the work continues.

If the work I have undertaken is resumed or extended by myself or others, considerations of the areas identified above are essential to its satisfactory outworking.

If the work I have undertaken challenges or inspires others to engage with their own denominational history as a resource for theological reflection, or if it prompts other Practical Theologians to engage more energetically with theoretical resources then it has succeeded more widely than the narrow remit of what I have reported.

Throughout my research work, two quotations have remained central to my thinking, expressing my hunch that this work was important and relevant. I believe it is apposite to close with the words of an archbishop who observes that '[t]o engage with the Church's past is to see something of the Church's future'³²⁴ which 'makes for the health of the church...'³²⁵ and those of a Baptist historian who observes that,

³²⁴ Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 94

³²⁵ ———, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. p. 113

as Baptists, 'knowledge of [our] past will inform the decisions [we] take today which will shape [our] tomorrow.'³²⁶ Can Baptist denominational history be used as a resource for theological reflection on the area of Church Health? I believe it not only can, but that it should.

³²⁶ White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* p. 6

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Appendix I: Issues Identified in the English Baptists Series of Books

Introduction

This Appendix outlines the issues identified in the first three books in the *English Baptist Series*, which occupied the minds congregations in those centuries.

Inevitably as mediated via secondary sources the element of selection cannot be readily discerned, rather the works offer a starting point for my own work in providing hints of pastoral issues that were either widespread or were ‘worked out’ in a fairly public arena.

Seventeenth Century

The key issues that seem to have occupied the minds of 17th century Baptists, who were seeking to establish their identity against a background of open hostility and persecution, reflect the embryonic nature of the tradition and are as follows³²⁷: -

- Believers’ Baptism, and who could administer it
- The laying on of hands (at Baptism and more generally)
- Church membership (essentially what is now termed ‘open’ and ‘closed’)
- Declarations and confessions of faith
- Religious toleration and relationships with the established church
- The seventh day Sabbath
- The lawfulness of taking oaths
- The errors of the Church of Rome
- Writings against Quakers

³²⁷ White, *The English Baptists of the 17th Century*.

In each of these areas a range of views can be found; there is no single ‘Baptist’ view. Given that the Baptist ‘cause’ was still in its infancy this is hardly surprising. The depth of thought and passion within the views of individuals is in keeping with a new movement seeking to determine its own identity. From the very beginning, with Smyth and Helwys disagreeing over who could rightly baptise another, opinions varied; argument and vitriol seem to be as commonplace as reasoned debate – 17th century Baptist life was certainly not dull!

Eighteenth Century

By the 18th century, Baptists were better established and more-or-less accepted. As a result the issues that occupied their minds changed as they began to face the realities of becoming an established (definitely with a small ‘e’) religious group. The issues identified by Brown are³²⁸: -

- Hymn singing
- Marriage outside of the congregation
- Christology
- Election
- Evangelism
- Antinomianism
- Socinianism
- Open/closed Communion

For the, often small and insular, Baptist churches of the 18th century issues about who they could or could not marry were highly relevant – the physical survival of

³²⁸ Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*.

their congregation depended upon it! Underlying issues that sound absurd to 21st century ears was a more subtle issue of the role of the Bible and how it was understood in relation to daily life – that which was not explicitly permitted by scripture was proscribed, a view which, though uncommon, is still sometimes heard to this day. A slow shift to the more familiar view that anything which scripture does not proscribe may be permissible could have been as much the result of social factors as theological consideration.

Nineteenth Century

In writing the history of the 19th century Baptists, Briggs³²⁹ deliberately adopts a different approach from the previous two writers. Rather than what he terms a ‘rise and fall’ chronological story, he uses a themed approach, and within each theme tells the story of roughly a century. This has both advantages and disadvantages since no theme is entirely independent of the others. Nevertheless, this approach reflects a once more changed historical context where Baptists are now very much part of society and the issues of note reflect a different ‘climate’ than was experienced by their predecessors. His chapter headings serve as a means of identifying the key issues: -

- Congregational life and worship
- Baptism and Communion
- Ministry and Ministerial training
- General and Particular
- Faith and Thought
- Associations, Alliances and the Wider Church

³²⁹ Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*.

- Number, Class and Gender
- Mission and Evangelism
- Baptists and Education
- Society and Politics

Within each of these broad headings is a wealth of smaller topics: the emergence of ‘Liberalism’ and the ‘Evangelical Alliance’, the involvement of Baptists in social action projects at home (e.g. in relation to apprentices and basic education for all irrespective of creed) and abroad (e.g. Jamaican slavery), the growth of overseas mission and the beginnings of domestic ecumenism. As the numbers of Baptist churches and the membership within them grew, attention seems to have shifted once more. The great Baptists, Clifford and Spurgeon, differing over many issues, both show an holistic and integrated theology, holding together and wrestling with diverse issues of social justice, Biblical authority and powerful preaching. Whilst at national and international levels Baptists were growing in influence, what is far less clear is what was happening in the local churches. Growing congregations were to varying degrees involved in association and union life – this numerical strength may have led to a growing stress on independence that remains to this day, rather than the interconnected autonomy of the earlier generations.

Summary

This very brief overview of the first three centuries of Baptist history in England, as seen through the eyes of three Baptist historians shows that change has always been part of Baptist life. Some issues such as Baptism and Communion continue to be discussed in similar ways to the original debates. Others find new forms – hymn singing and music, marriage policies and the ‘right’ theology of atonement or

election have different forms but they rumble on or are reinvented in new guises with each new generation. Some specific issues may no longer exist, yet the underlying questions remain relevant – slavery may have been abolished but questions of fair trade have echoes of a similar ethic; state education in the UK is available to those of all faiths or none but new questions arise about the teaching of religion or faith within it.

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Appendix II: Indicative Outline Programme of Work

This Appendix provides an outline programme of work for my research, recognising that slippage may occur and that some avenues may prove abortive or require re-work.

Year 1 – In-depth Theoretical Study

For each term the output will be a draft chapter for comment

- Term 1: Reader and writers – literary theory
- Term 2: Understanding and interpreting - hermeneutics
- Term 3: Theology/spirituality in historical writing
- Summer: Our story – identity and embeddedness

Year 2 – In-depth Theoretical Study continued

- Term 1: Educational transformation – pedagogy etc.
- Term 2: Telling the story for this purpose – drawing together findings to develop an approach for the case study
- Term 3: Identification of case study(s)
- Summer: Review of work to date, first draft of part dissertation, space to catch up slippage

Year 3 – Case Study and Write up

- Term 1: Primary research on case study(s)
- Term 2: First draft of case study and comparison with traditional telling
- Term 3: Complete first draft of dissertation
- Summer: Final version of dissertation

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Appendix III: Short Paper: Developing Resources for Theological Reflection within an Interpretive Community

This appendix presents a paper and presented at 2010 summer school of the DPT programme within the University of Manchester.

Abstract:

This paper is a 'work in progress' which seeks to explore how insights from literary theory, the history of reading and the concept of the interpretive community might inform the development of resources for theological reflection, specifically, though not exclusively, in the context of (English) Baptist churches using sources from their denominational history.

Necessarily brief consideration is given to four examples of interpretive community pertinent to this endeavour:

- *The reading practices of the 17th century, from which original source material will ultimately be selected. Historians of reading generally conclude that in this period reading was predominantly undertaken communally, with the hearers probably then discussing what had been read.*
- *An example of an attempt in the USA to develop a non-directive approach to the teaching of history in a primary school context: questions about group dynamics, power and authority.*
- *The 20th/21st century practice of Bible study groups, as I have experienced them noting variation in style and the dynamics of a small, self-selecting, intentional interpretive community.*
- *The 21st century (re-)emergence of the reading group and its potential implication for writers, e.g. the recent move to include 'notes for reading groups' at the end of novels.*

The possibility of a 'corporate ideal reader' is postulated and the implications for the 'real author' considered, with special reference to the development of theological resources for the specific intentional, faith, interpretive community that is a local Baptist church (at least as envisaged by this real author).

Introduction

"Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin." For around three decades, British children associated these words with listening to a story read to them on the radio, or wireless, as many knew it. My own recollections are as a child of six, one of around thirty sat cross-legged on the hard wooden floor of the school hall, gazing intently at the enormous wooden speaker from which wonderful tales would emerge. Tales that would form the basis of a class discussion, inspire our PE lessons, our painting, our playground games and, of course, English Composition. Listening to someone reading, talking about what has been heard, letting this inform and potentially shape real life... even in the sophisticated twenty-first century, visit any British primary school and the basic format continues. The concept of communal hearing and communal interpretation is nothing new, yet, in my experience anyway, is something one 'grows out of' as one acquires the skills of silent reading, independent thinking and critical engagement. With the exception of sermons, after-dinner speakers and academic lectures, there are few opportunities for adult communal listening. Even where they exist, there is often little scope for sustained discussion or reflection on what has been shared: question and answer sessions tend to be a series of unconnected bi-directional exchanges rather open-ended conversations; there is no equivalent to the play-ground re-enactment or delightfully clumsy poetry of the classroom. Is it possible that adults are losing out on something precious, something inherently creative and stretching as a result of isolated reading and independent reflection? Might a rediscovered communal listening-and-responding be beneficial? If so, what are the implications for those who seek to generate resources for such an approach and, specifically, how does this affect my desire to develop an approach to writing Baptist denominational history suited to theological reflection in a local congregation? In this necessarily short paper, I outline my initial thoughts, ironically

generated independently and as yet to be tested by community reading, hearing or discussion.

Reading in History

Robert Darnton³³⁰, writing on the history of reading, observes how the practice of reading has changed, notably since the emergence of printing, and how this must impact the way in which early documents are read by historians. Significantly, he notes 'the time is ripe for making a juncture between literary theory and the history of books'³³¹ Elsewhere, I have considered how insights from literary theory, notably those of real and implied authors and readers, have the potential to inform my approach to generating an approach to writing history, reflecting the purpose for which it is to be employed³³²; what Darnton adds to this is at least two-fold. Firstly, his recognition of importance of the *context* in which documents are written; this is important when considering my primary sources. As Darnton observes, the danger of assuming that 'seventeenth-century Englishmen read Milton and Bunyan as if they were twentieth-century college professors'³³³; this applies equally to seventeenth century Baptist books, tracts and leaflets. The way in which documents were read, and the implications that had for the real authors, must be taken into account if they are to be properly understood. Whilst historians of reading agree that it is not possible, conclusively, to prove how reading was practised in seventeenth-century Britain, nevertheless, they concur that it is likely to have been a communal

³³⁰ R. Darnton, "History of Reading," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Burke, P. (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

³³¹ Darnton, "History of Reading." p.158

³³² C. J. M. Gorton, "Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: Reflective Practice: Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Reading and Writing within the Research Process," (University of Manchester, 2009), C. J. M. Gorton, "Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: Research Proposal: Baptist Denominational History as a Resource for Theological Reflection in the Area of Church Health," (University of Manchester, 2009).

³³³ Darnton, "History of Reading." p.158-9

enterprise, potentially with readers being employed for the purpose³³⁴. Certainly there is evidence that at least some early Baptist congregations employed a practice of closing the Bible once it had been read depending entirely on what was recalled for the sermon that followed. Due account of such factors needs to be taken in working with documents written in this period.

The second implication of what Darnton observes relates to the role of the author or writer: that books were read aloud, to an assembled audience, whether a family group or an intentional gathering, such as a local congregation, must have shaped the writer's approach; in their imagination was an assembled group who would probably hear (rather than read) what had been written, and who would then discuss what had been heard. This is directly relevant to my own endeavour to create resources for use by Baptist congregations, i.e. intentional communities reading (hearing or watching³³⁵) material with the specific aim of discussing, interpreting and reflecting upon it with the intention that it might inform or transform local practice. The practical implication is that my work must give serious consideration to readers (individual and corporate) who will employ the resources and how that informs the method developed. It is this that the remainder of this paper is devoted.

Reading History; Determining Meaning

'In fourteen hundred and ninety two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.' Rhymes and mnemonics, dates and places, facts and figures: such was the typical teaching of

³³⁴ S. R. Fischer, *A History of Reading* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), A. Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), H.-J. Martin, *The History and Power of Writing*, trans. Cochrane, L. G. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), J. Raven, H. Small, and N. Tadmor, *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³³⁵ Whilst my intention is primarily to explore means of writing history, I recognise that widespread use of 'new' technologies such as audio and visual media in education and worship contexts cannot simply be ignored; the possibility of such media is not excluded at this stage.

history in English state education until at least the 1970s. Being able to recall the order of the wives Henry VIII (divorced, beheaded, died; divorced, beheaded survived) or regurgitating received wisdom on the 'Irish Question' under Cromwell were important to passing public examinations in history. By the late 1970s, and notably in the 'lesser' CSE syllabi, the use of primary and secondary sources was beginning to emerge in secondary education, along with the use of group work rather than private study aimed at answering essay questions.

Whilst searching for literature on interpretive communities, I discovered a paper by an American writer reflecting on his experiences of attempting to introduce fifth grade students³³⁶ to the use of sources and what he terms the 'history's interpretive paradox'³³⁷, i.e. the connection between interpretation and reality. Bruce VanSledright divided the children into groups and provided them with a range of resources relating to the 'Starving Times' of Jamestown. Each group was then asked to use the 'clues' to determine the cause of the events. After some initial false starts – and an unsubstantiated theory that worms ate the food – the children learned to use the resources. What VanSledright had not anticipated was the attractiveness of a particular hypothesis to the children, that George Percy was a greedy liar, even when it was not, in his view, the most plausible from the evidence supplied³³⁸. Whilst the experiment was overall judged successful, two questions arise in relation to my own work.

³³⁶ Approximately equivalent to Year 6 (England) or Primary 7 (Scotland) in being the final year of primary education; in terms of chronological age, approximately 10-11 years.

³³⁷ B. VanSledright, "Confronting History's Interpretive Paradox While Teaching Fifth Graders to Investigate the Past," *American Educational Research Journal* 39, no. 4 (2002).

³³⁸ He noted the glee with which children seized on the hypothesis of a typical 'baddy'. In my view he overlooks or fails to anticipate how ages/stages and culture may have impacted their response. He notes that he used the metaphor of 'detective' to describe the task of the historian, yet seems not to have anticipated the potential link to 'crime solving' which in this age group is likely to be equated with finding the baddy (c.f. for example Scooby Doo).

The first question relates to the selection of sources and resources. Whilst adults ought to be able to appreciate the status of primary and secondary sources, and to understand the issues each raises, hopefully making them less likely to proffer unfounded theories, they will be equally dependent on the range of material supplied. The power of the *selection process*, and the editing, *précising*, paraphrasing or updating of English, cannot be underestimated: a balance needs to be struck between overwhelming a group with information and steering an interpretation (deliberately or otherwise) by taking passages out of context. Power extends beyond what is selected; there is great power in directing the investigation. VanSledright's question, 'what was the cause' is reasonable, but it is not the only question that might be asked of the same resources; it is possible to formulate questions that narrow or skew interpretation towards a desired conclusion. The power of the *author* and/or *facilitator* cannot be underestimated and needs close attention. An amusing, but ultimately disingenuous, example of this is offered in the work Stanley Fish³³⁹. During a class he was teaching on the relationship between linguistics and literary criticism he wrote the following on his blackboard:

Jacobs-Rosenbaum

Levin

Thorne

Hayes

Ohman (?)

³³⁹ S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (London: Harvard University Press, 1980).

This was a list of reading for the assignment he had set them, a list of writers to be considered, the bracketed question mark being because he was unsure of the spelling of the final name. Immediately after this he taught a second class in seventeenth century English religious poetry. Between classes he drew a frame around the words and wrote above it p.43:

p.43

<p>Jacobs-Rosenbaum Levin Thorne Hayes Ohman (?)</p>
--

When the class entered the room he 'told them that what they saw on the blackboard was a religious poem of the kind they had been studying and [he] asked them interpret it.'³⁴⁰ The class succeeded in completing the allocated task, offering plausible explanations. Fish sees this as evidence that an interpretive community can find what it expects to find. Whilst this is plausible, he fails to comment on the fact that he had told them they were examining a religious poem: his own power appears unrecognised.

A second question that arises from VanSledright's (and indeed Fish's) work relates to the characteristics and dynamics of the group. A determined character can impose his/her opinion on a group irrespective of its validity (c.f. Fish misleading his class); popular interpretations (e.g. the romantic mystery of "Liar Percy") may override

³⁴⁰ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. p.323

evidence; group loyalty (or herd mentality) may overrule individual conviction.

Whilst the creator of a resource cannot know the details of specific groups, she/he needs to have some idea of likely generic characteristics. In developing resources for members of Baptist churches, a useful starting point is consideration of the kind of groups and approaches most typically encountered.

Reading Together: Group Bible Study

It is Wednesday evening at 7:30. A group of people sit on ill assorted chairs, clutching mugs of tea, munching digestive biscuits and engaging in general conversation. After a while the recognised leader takes charge, mugs are exchanged for Bibles, and attention turns to the serious matter of the passage or topic under consideration. Variously known as Bible Class, Bible Study, House or Home Groups, these are small, intentional gatherings of Christians to read the Bible with the agreed (if unvoiced) aim of growing in their understanding of their faith and practice. Irrespective of the name used, and often irrespective of the theological leanings of the church(es) from which members are drawn, certain factors are, in my experience, common.

Groups are usually self-selecting. Whilst a small minority of churches allocate people to specific groups, in practice people choose whether or not to join a group and will choose one where they feel comfortable. The basis of this comfort may be prior friendships, age, approach, theology, education, or any number of other factors. As a result, groups tend to be cohesive and can drift into exclusivity. In some groups relationships can deepen, allowing more honesty, openness and vulnerability, others remain superficial even if they meet regularly for many years.

Each group establishes its own internal dynamics, and can become a community in miniature, with emergent or self-appointed leaders, followers, encouragers, facilitators etc. Once a group is established it can become entirely predictable who will sit where, who will speak (and in which order) and who will keep silent. Different models are employed within such groups, from very prescriptive to very interactive, any of which may be well-loved by its members. Four broad types are outlined below.

At one extreme is the *'expert' leader* with subordinate hearers. The use of 'quote' marks is deliberate, since expertise may exist only in the mind of this person who acts as authority. Usually where I have encountered this model, the leader undertakes a verse-by-verse exposition of a Bible passage, telling her/his hearers what it means for their lives. Such a didactic approach is disappearing but still remains, often among older and/or more conservative congregations in England, and is evident in some Scottish churches where the mid-week meeting is precisely this form of Bible-study.

A more interactive approach is the *book-led* study with a facilitator. Numerous study guides and work books are available for Bible study groups covering individual books of the Bible, specific themes and/or (increasingly) using popular films and books as connecting points. In these groups questions range from very directive, "what does verse 5 say about..." to others that are, ostensibly, open-ended. Beyond the power of choosing which material to use, two layers of control are at work here: firstly there is the direction set by the writer who chooses questions to fit with his/her intent for the study; secondly the leader chooses which questions to include, omit,

rephrase or adapt. Whilst the group has opportunity to engage with the texts, it is in a prescribed way. Some groups rotate leaders, either weekly or for each new study-guide, giving a different dynamic from those where the same person always leads or selects the material.

A variant on this approach is to employ locally-generated material. Here an 'expert' leader (often in practice the minister) selects and prepares material for others to engage with. Dependent on the personalities of participants, this can tend towards the didactic model or can, at its best, offer authentic, informed, local engagement.

A fourth model is rarely seen, and requires a higher level of openness and trust than any of the foregoing. In this approach, based on liberation theology models, a text is read aloud within a group – perhaps in plural voices or translations – and members invited to offer observations and/or ask questions of or about the text. In such groups there is no 'right answer' or 'received wisdom' on how the study should proceed; instead a facilitator ensures that voices are heard, opinions respected and insights shared. This is a risky strategy, yet those who have learned to engage with it often value it greatly. Such an approach is probably the closest to the practice believed to have been employed within at least some seventeenth century Baptist congregations.

Each model of Bible study group is an interpretive community, with its own expectations, rules and norms; what differs is how, and by whom, the interpretation is made. For those who have spent their lives with an expert-led didactic model, the free-for-all of the unstructured conversation is threatening. Similarly, for those

trained to question and critique, the book-led approach can be restricting. It is not necessarily that one form of interpretive community is intrinsically better or worse, rather they operate differently. At their worst, any of the models may lead to recycling of ignorance, dogma or error; at their best each can offer new insights to those involved. One of the challenges that arise in considering the development of resources for theological reflection is, which type(s) of group is envisaged? Is part of the aim to enable groups to gain the confidence that will allow them to move from more to less prescriptive approaches (essentially learning how to select/develop their own resources in the process) or is it more prescriptive, being more akin to the locally generated material (combining openness in questions with guidance in direction)? What kind of interpretive community is the *τέλος* towards which the resource aims? Before endeavouring to address these questions, necessarily brief consideration is given to the (re-)emergence of reading groups in contemporary Britain.

Reading in Groups: Another Perspective

Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey undertook a wide-ranging survey of reading groups, predominantly in Britain, published in 2001³⁴¹. Interestingly, Bible-reading groups are included in the scope of their research, though not discussed extensively. The results showed that reading groups, far from being something new, date back to ancient times, and certainly grew in popularity after the emergence of printing. Notably, whilst there are British groups dating back to the eighteenth century, there has clearly been a rapid increase in numbers in recent years. The evidence shows that the groups are incredibly wide-ranging, yet have many of the characteristics seen in Bible study groups – self-selection, food(!) and conversation. The

³⁴¹ J. Hartley and S. Turvey, *Reading Groups* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

substantive difference is not in the style of groups but in the approach to reading and the intent of conversation. Whilst the Bible study group will (in my experience) always include reading aloud the material to be considered, it is comparatively rare in other reading groups. Instead members are expected to have read a whole work prior to the meeting, and in some cases to have prepared written notes or a report! Use of commentaries and guides is welcomed in some groups and eschewed by others, variously seen as too intellectual or too constraining. Unlike the Bible study group who expect their reading to inform their living, the majority of reading groups do not (at least not in the same way). The aims can be purely social, to make friends or (often cited) to have a personal interest outside the home. Conversations are more likely to relate to whether the book was 'enjoyable' or 'good' than the issues it (may have) raised or explored.

For the purposes of my research the like and not-like aspects of Bible study and other reading groups are significant. Church history is not accorded the same authority as scripture, nor do readers (generally) approach it seeking insights for their own lives. Typically it is read in private, rarely is it discussed – a fundamental challenge is to promote communal engagement with this resource. Does the reading-group model of private reading and group discussion provide an interim step, and if so, what kind of materials would be appropriate and appealing? Might 'study guides' or 'notes for reading groups' be helpful in encouraging the kind of engaged reading that is desired? Would participants be willing or able to undertake the necessary preparatory reading? One of the frequent comments encountered by Hartley and Turvey was that people had not read all (or sometimes any) of the book³⁴²; it is

³⁴² Hartley and Turvey, *Reading Groups*.

inconceivable that those reading history would fare any better, even if the volume of reading was far smaller. So, might it after all be that the Bible study approach, whereby passages are selected and read aloud is actually a more hopeful prospect?

If the historians of reading are correct in their deduction that much seventeenth century reading was undertaken communally and aloud, then it follows that material from that period offers a valuable starting point for contemporary readers both as it stands (as primary material) and as a model to be considered in developing new, secondary materials. Two interesting examples arise in this respect, both of which employ fictive conversations as a medium for exploring complex theological and pastoral issues. Fascinating too, is the public debate between protagonists which embodies the same approach. The hymn-singing debate between Keach and Marlow³⁴³ is an example of Particular Baptists writing³⁴⁴ whilst among General Baptists Tory and Griffith³⁴⁵ use a similar approach in their works on so-called mixed marriages. Whilst impossible to prove, it is easy to imagine two readers being involved in a public reading of these works, in which the authors pull no punches in

³⁴³ I. Marlow, *Preprinted Forms of Praising God Vocally Sung by All the Church Together Proved to Be No Gospel Ordinance in a Sober Discourse Concerning Singing* (London: 1691), B. Keach, *The Breach Repaired in God's Worship; or Singing of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs Proved to Be an Ordinance of Christ*. (London: John Hancock, reprint by Kessinger 2005, 1691), B. Keach, *An Answer to Mr Marlow's Appendix* (London: John Hancock, reprint Kessinger 2005, 1691), I. Marlow, *A Postscript: In Answer Farther to a Book Entitled, Folly Detected, Published by Mr Joseph Wright; and a Paper Called, An Appendix or Brief Answer to Mr Marlow's Notion of the Essence of Singing, by T W and to a Paper Called an Answer to a Brief Discourse Concerning Singing* (London: 1692), I. Marlow, *The Controversy of Singing Brought to an End or a Treatise in Three Parts* (London: 1696), I. Marlow, *Truth Soberly Defended. In a Serious Reply to Mr Benjamin Keach's Book Intituled "The Breach Repaired in God's Worship; or Singing of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, Proved to Be an Ordinance of Christ"* (London: 1692).

³⁴⁴ Pace most English Baptist historians who describe this as solely a General Baptist issue

³⁴⁵ S. Tory, *Mixt Marriages Vindicated or a Discourse of Mixt Marriages by Way of a Dialogue between a and B Who Are of the Same Profession in Matters of Religion but of Different Apprehensions in the Point of Marriage* (London: 1640), J. Griffith, *The Unlawfulness of Mixt-Marriages or an Answer to the Book Entitled Mixt Marriages Vindicated in a Dialogue between a and B Written by Stephen Tory in a Friendly Discourse between E and F* (London: 1681).

making their case, and of the hearers being drawn into lively debate on the topics covered.

Writing for Groups: Real Authors and Corporate Ideal Readers

I'll tell you a story

About Jackanory

And now my story's begun;

I'll tell you another

Of Jack and his brother

And now my story is done.

This paper began with my childhood recollections of corporate listening and responding to stories and speculation as to whether such an approach might be beneficial to the enterprise of encouraging local congregations to engage creatively with historical resources. Specialist historians suggest that for most of history, far from being a privatised and personal affair, reading was undertaken communally with works being discussed and opinions offered, a view consistent with some evidence of early Baptist practice of Bible-reading. Literary theory with its postulate of an 'ideal' reader needs to take account of this nuance, that rather than 'one person' the reader is 'corporate'; this has implications for my work both in employing early Baptist materials and in considering how this important insight might inform the method(s) developed for creating resources. The work of VanSledright, with children, and Fish, with undergraduates, highlights some of the challenges that face both the collator and the facilitator of work with communities of interpretation, whilst the review of reading groups by Hartley and Turvey illustrates the comparative oddity of communal listening and responding among adult readers, even

when they are part of a group. So what are the implications for my work as a 'real author' endeavouring to create materials for a 'corporate ideal reader'?

In selecting primary sources, careful attention will need to be given to how they may best be read in the context of a group. Are they suitable for reading aloud, and if so, in one voice or many? How much background information is needed to enable them to be meaningfully employed without pre-empting interpretation? If material is better read silently (independently) how is this best managed; e.g. advance reading of prescribed texts, time allowed in a meeting?

My overall aim is concerned with theological reflection under the banner of church health. Inevitably this shapes not only the choice of material (what is included) but how it is presented. It will be necessary to identify an 'ideal group' for whom material is being generated taking into account not only the power that lies with the writer but also that of the 'real leader' who may omit, augment or rephrase parts of what is offered. The 'ideal corporate reader' is a group that is enthusiastic about the task, open to new insights from old stories, willing to make connections between past and present in order to shape the future. The story already begun is a good starting place, but there is another chapter still to be told which will be shaped by the 'real writer' and 'real corporate reader.'

So, to end, an imagined scenario:

There is a buzz in the air as the group meets. Charles, a historian, is chatting to Marjory who works in the corner shop; Saffron, a media studies student passes the biscuits to Kate, a computer programmer, whilst local GP Dave can be heard

sympathising with postman Pete over anti-social working hours. What unites them is their membership of Anytown Baptist Church and their commitment to reflect together. Alex calls them to order, reminds them of the aims of the group and begins telling the story... Listening carefully, the members spot connections with their lives, note questions that arise, identify points of disagreement... A lively conversation follows...

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