

TRACING BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL FOOTPRINTS - A CARIBBEAN PERSPECTIVE

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The Baptists in the Caribbean

As a means of setting the context for this presentation we should note that Baptist witness entered the Caribbean in the 18th century and owes its origin to the exodus, of formerly enslaved and enslaved persons of faith from the southern coast of the United States. 'The oldest work in the region is found in the Bahamas, Jamaica and Trinidad'¹. In the case of Jamaica, Liele a former slave who had founded a church in Savannah, Georgia went there and began Baptist work in 1783. The work extended to Guyana, Haiti and the Turks and Caicos Islands soon after.

'It is significant that the Baptist Churches in the Caribbean developed from the people, who had fled from Slavery to Freedom and had therefore a strong affinity to the message of the Exodus and Exile of the Old Testament. The leadership was drawn for the most part from within itself. It was not a church on the peripheral but of the deeper issues, and had therefore to be a radical and revolutionary church, involving itself actively in politics and where there was a unified structure this occurred around a theological college and a training programme'.²

¹ Horace Russell, Baptists of the Caribbean

² Unknown Source

In reflecting on how the distinctives identified by Randall have been applied in the Caribbean region greater focus will be given to areas that could be considered more distinctly Caribbean and critical to our self understanding. These are Reading the Bible and Resisting the Powers as against Redeeming the Powers. Brief comments will be made with respect to the other areas, as in many ways much of what has been said by Randall are not difficult to be reconciled with our context

READING THE BIBLE

In looking at the role of the Bible for Baptists in the Caribbean we would agree that what is distinctive for Baptists has not been a doctrine of Biblical authority but more so a particular way of reading the Bible. This reading has evolved over time from an interpretation heavily influenced by a European reading of the Bible to a reading through the lens of a people coming out of a history of slavery and colonialism. The European reading was strongly based on its own context, although passed on to other parts of the world as normative, and though not totally meaningless to the Caribbean it proved limited.

In light of this reality Caribbean people have engaged in our own reading based on our historical circumstances and life experiences. Our approach has had to be very contextual and practical as we apply the Bible to our understanding and practice of the Christian Faith, through Caribbean eyes and within Caribbean culture.

It is of significance that we note that the Bible has been used in the past as a tool of oppression in the maintenance of the status quo and prevailing ideology during periods of slavery and colonialism. Yet even within these periods there were Baptists such as Sam Sharpe and Paul Bogle in Jamaica for example who through their reading employed the Bible as a tool of liberation and empowerment.

Sharpe was a Jamaica born slave and a deacon in the Baptist church whose rereading of the Bible served as a strong influence in the wars of liberation and ultimately contributed to the abolition of slavery. Oral Thomas makes reference to a ‘resistant reading’ of the biblical text and he locates Sharpe within this interpretive genre ‘Sharpe centered his interpretive approach in his praxis, his daily struggle for freedom and equality in an oppressive and unjust society and placed the struggle for freedom within the Biblical Tradition of emancipation.’³

When Sharpe was questioned if he got the idea that he ought to be free from the missionaries he said, ‘No one minister said such a word. Not one, Sir. But me read it in my Bible.’⁴ The Bible was pivotal in his understanding of freedom.

Bleby recorded that Sam Sharpe said: ‘he learnt from his Bible, that the whites had no more right to hold black people in slavery, than the black people had to make the white people slaves; and, for his own part, he would rather die than live in slavery.’⁵ Sharpe’s belief in the right to be free was radical because even the Anti -Slavery Society did not base their agitation for the termination of slavery on the right to be free or equality of human races but rather on the abuses and evils attendant to slavery as practiced in the West Indies.

Bleby recorded Sharpe’s attitude toward freedom:

The last time I conversed with Sharpe . . . He was not, however, to be convinced that he had done wrong in endeavouring to assert his claim to freedom. ‘When reminded

³ Oral Thomas, Contextual contestations in biblical hermeneutics within a Caribbean context: a case for Biblical resistant hermeneutic Unpublished PHD thesis pg 47

⁴ “The Christian Hero: Another Reminiscence of the Insurrection in Jamaica,” Baptist Reporter July 1864: 305. See also Clark, Dendy and Phillippo 56.

⁵ Henry Bleby, Death Struggles of Slavery (London, 1853) 116. See also Bleby, Scenes 18.

that the Scriptures teach men to be content with the station allotted to them by Providence, and that even slaves are required patiently to submit to their lot, till the Lord in his providence is pleased to change it,' - he was a little staggered, and said, 'if I have done wrong in that, I trust I shall be forgiven; for I cast myself upon the Atonement.'⁶

Sharpe had his own interpretation and he rejected the understanding that said he should passively wait and not claim his right to be free.

The Exodus story, Luke 4:16-18, the Matthean teaching of Jesus that no man can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24) and Colossians 3:11 were the ideological basis for what was called the Baptist War of 1831⁷. This war of liberation was believed to have been led by Sam Sharpe.

During the post emancipation period, Paul Bogle, a Baptist deacon in Jamaica also focused his biblical interpretive strategy on the oppressive material conditions the souls lived in rather than on the need for soul salvation.⁸

Devon Dick states that 'Bogle's religious conviction was shaped by his love of the psalms. His hermeneutical key was the last judgment based on psalms 11, 50 and 143'⁹. Judgment was a present reality for him... 'Bogle's praxis, his daily struggle for justice for the poor and his presupposition that God is on the side of the poor, fuelled his advocacy and protests for social justice and marked his exegetical strategy.' Bogle comes to the biblical text through involvement in and out of a real life context.

⁶ Bleby, *Death Struggles* 117.

⁷ Phillip Sherlock, *Shout For Freedom: A Tribute to Sam Sharpe* (London: McMillan Education Limited, 1976), p X

⁸ Oral Thomas, PhD Thesis unpublished, pg 62

⁹ Devon Dick. Masters Thesis unpublished written to advocate that Paul Bogle was a Christian Hero; see also Clinton Hutton, PhD Thesis *Colour for Colour: Skin for Skin*, 992.

In the post Emancipation and Independence period, Caribbean people have continued to develop a way of reading the Bible intended to liberate and empower the economically and politically oppressed people of the region by analyzing a variety of experiences, situations and realities that are vitally important to the quality of life of Caribbean people. A liberation tradition has been developed with a strategy of critical reflection on praxis. The hermeneutical approach encourages the reading of the Bible with new eyes, i.e. Caribbean and contextual, using interpretive tools such as history and sociology. Kortright Davis proposes that in terms of choosing the Bible as a source for doing Caribbean Theology, that process has a task: 'To understand Scripture itself and to translate it into appropriate terms in the Caribbean Culture, as well as to understand that culture and translate it back into categories which can be compared with scripture' ¹⁰

Theologians of the region are therefore free to think of God, to engage in God talk and to interpret the scriptures in full awareness of the cultural context in which we live and operate. The understanding and interpretation of scripture has therefore been approached not just as a matter of individual interpretation or within the realm of the congregational community but has also been intricately linked with a reflection of the self understanding of a society within a wide geographical and historical spread.

Baptists in the Caribbean in their approach to reading the Bible have given voice and credence to community participation and interpretation, due recognition have been given to the place of collective wisdom and insight. In fact, given the strong Oral Culture of the Caribbean, Biblical interpretation have never been restricted to clergy or the confines of the church. Preference in this religious context is for narrative styles in communicating truths about the faith, as opposed to dogmatic, didactic, philosophical teaching styles. According to Kortright Davis 'the real theologizing among Caribbean people is done orally, narratively and informally...the real

¹⁰ Kortright Davis pg 127

theological workshops in the Caribbean are the homes, the fields, the streets, rather than the seminaries or the churches.¹¹

Significant emphasis has also been placed on the role and place of the Holy Spirit in enabling our interpretation of scripture. It is with the help of the Holy Spirit that the whole people of God is tasked to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age and to judge them in the light of the word of God.

The approach of Caribbean Baptists has therefore been very practical and contextual, yet there is recognition that by its very contextual nature it has not been seen by some as authentic reading. What we have inherited is a reading from a different environment which reflects another context. We have had to do our own re-reading and must challenge ourselves to develop our own resources such as biblical commentaries which reflect greater relevance to Caribbean society.

RESISTING THE POWERS

The concept of resisting or challenging the powers is more a distinctive of Caribbean Baptists than redeeming the powers. As Randall has conceded 'at times it has been true to say that resisting the powers or even abandoning the powers have been more apt descriptions of baptistic reactions to the world'.¹²

This is not a position that can be acknowledged with a mere passing reference in the case of the Caribbean. Burchell Taylor observes that 'the powers of European presence in some parts of the world would have been experienced in some instances in a way that would have made it more difficult to conceive of them as redeemable'¹³

¹¹ Kortright Davis, *Emancipation still comin* 93, 94

¹² Ian Randall, *Tracing Baptist Theological Footprints: A European Perspective*, paper presented at International Theological Seminary Prague, Czech Republic, 2008.

¹³ Burchell Taylor, *Comments on Ian Randall's Paper*, Prague 2008

The social, political and cultural dominance of Europe in the Caribbean has been far reaching. Genocide, slavery, indentured labour, colonialism and poverty have been experienced in ways that resulted in suffering. The revolutionary and social dimensions of Christianity were not shared by the Established Churches or the political structure. Baptists reacted to and resisted this alliance between the established church and state as from all indications the Established Church was complicit with the evils of the state.

In light of these experiences Baptists in the Caribbean have had to interact with the state in ways that could have been and in some cases were perceived as violent and disruptive. What they in fact did was to challenge the powers against oppression and inequity while advocating for social and economic transformation. The reading of the Bible gave the impetus and justification to do so as can be seen in the references made earlier to persons like Bogle and Sharpe.

It would also be true to say that the Caribbean Church has worked alongside and cooperated with the powers, in engagements intended to contribute to the development of the society. This has been done through cooperative efforts in making significant resources available for public education and land ownership in particular in an effort to make a difference in the quality of people's lives. In fact 'the availability or unavailability of land defined the stance of the Baptist church on some issues; even Knibb a British Baptist, whose work was situated in the midst of well-developed estates where little surplus land was available, inevitably led the opposition against the planters because he was of the view that his membership was trapped.'¹⁴

At the same time the Separation of church and State is encouraged to the extent that the independence and freedom of the church is maintained, so that we are continuously poised to address issues of justice, governance, morality, socio economic

¹⁴ Horace Russell, *The Missionary Outreach of the West Indian Church*, Peter Lang 2000, p 53

concerns among others. Caribbean Baptists strongly believe that we have an awesome responsibility to be that prophetic voice, able to speak truth to power at all times.

There is a sense in which we recognize the powers not just as political power but economic, social and cultural constructs. ‘The church cannot avoid responding to the cultures in which it exists, but the mandate of the church in its final analysis is not determined by the culture. The critical question is how will the church in the Caribbean engage the culture so that our dignity is enhanced not diminished? To do so in faithfulness and with credibility, the church must be vigilant so that its necessary identification with its context does not so tie it to its societal structures that it is unable to give witness in the midst of change and officially masked chaos.’¹⁵

LIVING THE LIFE

Discipleship is a critical component of Baptist faith and practice in the Caribbean with a strongly Christocentric framework. The experience of personal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, symbolized by both baptism and the Lord’s Supper is integral. The life and teaching of Jesus Christ and obedience by the community must be lived out in practical ways as demonstrated by Jesus and there ought to be no dichotomy between confession and conduct. Our relationship with Christ must be reflected in our every day relationships and lifestyle. This for us very often translates itself into commitment to and solidarity with the oppressed.

Living the life makes emancipation possible from everything that oppresses. This view differs from the traditional missionary reading which did not question certain practices but emphasized holy living while seemingly ignoring the circumstances of person’s lives which were dehumanizing, oppressive and went unquestioned.

¹⁵ Unknown

In fact, the Caribbean people lived out their discipleship even within the setting of slavery to the point where transformation took place in some instances even among those who sought initially to impart to them their understanding of discipleship. Some missionaries returned home to tell of the stories of a people who had developed a relationship with Christ which gave them the courage to live out their faith.

NURTURING THE COMMUNITY

Our treatment of community as Caribbean Baptists would necessarily not be restricted to the church community but would include the wider community that exists outside of the Christian church.

Kortright Davis gives further expression to this in making the point that ‘the sense of community surely takes its nurture from the Caribbean understanding of God the Holy Spirit - the unseen (but not unexperienced) power of God in God’s world, particularly among God’s people but not only among them.....Solidarity and not individualism ought to characterize the community who believes in the solidarity of communal love which the Spirit gives, and they seek to identify the meaning of a Caribbean Spirit of solidarity with the concrete manifestation of the work of God the Holy Spirit ¹⁶

The Caribbean church is also a worshipping community, with God as the focus and source of our worship. This worshipping community declares Christ as Lord and inevitably takes on a political and subversive tone in the face of individualism and anything that undermines the community.

Caribbean Baptists in some quarters are strongly ecumenical and cooperates with other denominations in the sharing of worship resources, Christian education literature and theological education for example. The Caribbean Christian Publications, The Caribbean Conference of Churches and the United Theological College of the West Indies are institutions in which Caribbean Baptists are involved

¹⁶ Kortright Davis, Emancipation Still Comin’

and which facilitate this kind of cooperation. The local church community and wider community come together at various levels for worship, celebration and corporative efforts.

In addition to ecumenical relationships the church in the Caribbean is challenged to take a serious look at interfaith dialogue recognizing the plurality of religions and communities. We believe that we must engage in dialogue with other communities, affirming our common humanity and a common God. This kind of interfaith dialogue will lend itself to interfaith cooperation in addressing moral issues, crime, socioeconomic concerns, and ecology among other areas and helps to create an environment where hostility and suspicion is broken down. This is certainly an area to which we need to give more focused attention.

In fact, the divisions which exist in many areas outside of the Caribbean are historical, and in many ways we are all a transported people seeking to establish a community. We do not experience much of the deep seated tensions that exist in some other parts of the world. It is therefore more probable that we could commit ourselves to creating a kind of community and society within the Caribbean that others could emulate.

TELLING THE STORY/ MISSION / EVANGELISM

The church in the Caribbean and has had to seriously wrestle with the concept of mission and evangelism in light of its historical experience. Its theology has been deeply dominated by a colonial era which strongly reflected the ideology of the time and reinforced the status quo. The dominant thinking emphasized individual salvation with no evident consideration to the reign of God's Kingdom in a wider sense and its impact on the structures of society and the general human condition. The gospel seemed quite superficial in its presentation.

Caribbean people have therefore engaged in telling the story shaped by Caribbean experiences, history and culture. We have been engaged in a process of transforming mission.

There has been a shift from a focus solely on personal and individual salvation to a much broader and far reaching focus which explores the nature of the Kingdom of God and its implications for faith and justice issues. 'The mission of Jesus is the mission of the church. It is a mission of involvement in the Divine action to bring about a socio-political restructuring of the relations among the people of God. This is a mission that cannot be pursued in the name of religious salvation'.¹⁷

The story we tell is one of social change and transformation not just from sin as a personally lived experience but a communal experience as well.

Baptists in the Caribbean have sought to give significance to Mission through its social engagement by helping persons to understand that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not far removed from their social and economic circumstances and their justice issues, but by working alongside persons in concrete ways has been able to provide hope in a God who is very much present in their lives. This found practical expression from the time of slavery when Baptists were accused of instigation rebellion by their sermons which spoke to liberation and freedom in Jesus Christ, when they took seriously the social circumstances of persons and became involved in the provision of free villages. People were made aware that the gospel was not intended to be oppressive but liberating.

Caribbean Baptists have been telling the story through mission partnerships forged and developed with other Caribbean and non Caribbean people, including places such as the United Kingdom, South Africa and West Africa. We have also engaged in mission by sending persons to places where our people go to work and live as was the

¹⁷ Harold Sitahal, *Out of the Depths* edited by Edris Hamid, pg 44

case with panama for example and we continue to actively relate with the diaspora in mission engagements.

The nature of mission itself has been in many respects redefined. The Caribbean has become a mission centre which not only receives but sends and gives expression to a true Spirit of partnership in Mission.

CONCLUSION

In concluding, Baptists in the Caribbean are conscious of the dynamic environment in which we live and the ongoing challenges, which in are not necessarily new, though they may be manifested differently. In many ways we have been shaped by and have embraced a rich Baptist Heritage from both within and outside of our context and we continue to reflect on the way forward so that that we too can leave foot prints that are continuously relevant and can help to shape the future.

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