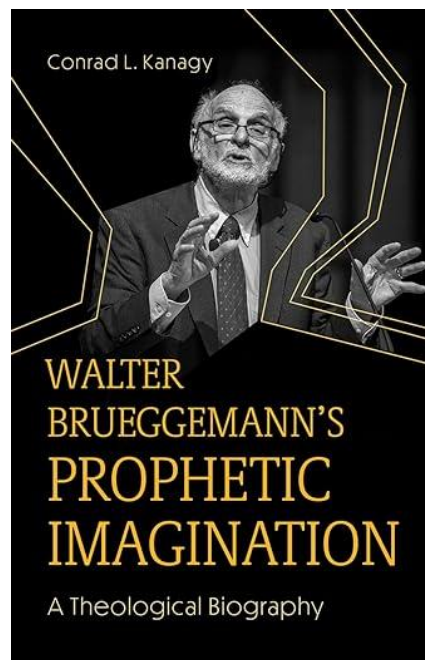


A Reader's Guide for Individuals and Groups

*Walter Brueggemann's Prophetic Imagination:
A Theological Biography*



Guide written by Conrad L. Kanagy

Introduction

1. What crisis prompted Kanagy to seek out Walter Brueggemann, and ask him if he had a biography?
2. Did Brueggemann agree or disagree with Kanagy about the thesis that God might be dismantling the church? What was Brueggemann's response? And what do you think about this idea that God's spirit is dismantling the church as we have socially constructed it?
3. What changes does Kanagy identify that have occurred in many American congregations over the last two decades, regarding attitudes about politics and government? To what extent do you agree or disagree that this is a critical moment, or even a Bonhoeffer moment for the church in this country?
4. How has your own congregation experienced the growing embrace of many evangelical Christians toward a populist nationalism that has foundations on the historic racism of the United States?
5. Progressive Christians are not without fault either. In fact, Brueggemann repeatedly expresses disappointment with the abandonment of the biblical text by progressives. How do you assess Walter's views of both left and right?
6. Kanagy wrote the biography as a sociologist and not a theologian. What were the advantages of this perspective in writing Brueggemann's story? What were the downsides?
7. How did Kanagy's approach reflect a sociological perspective in evaluating and interpreting Brueggemann's life? What does Kanagy mean when he says that he wanted to get into the basement of Brueggemann's life? Do you think he achieved the goal?
8. What challenges did Kanagy face in getting inside of Brueggemann? What breakthrough occurred that led to a greater opening of Walter's inner life?
9. Kanagy uses Jesus' parable of the Sower and the seed to frame the Brueggemann story. Are there other scriptures that might be applied in an analogous way?
10. Brueggemann is adept at creating categories by which one might interpret the scripture in new ways. But the man himself resists being placed into closed categories. Is this an inconsistency in Brueggemann or how would you interpret this resistance? It may be useful to read Sam Wells' Foreword to answer this question.
11. What is the unique contribution of Kanagy's biography to Brueggemann readers?
12. Kanagy has learned many folks they were waiting for Brueggemann's story to be written even if they were not aware they were doing so? What need has this book met? Why are the biographies of authors that we love, and particularly theologians, important to us?
13. What questions are you left with after the Introduction?
14. What are the most important learnings for you in the Introduction?

Chapter One: A Prophetic Breakthrough

1. What personal qualities do you identify in Walter Brueggemann? What qualities did others see in him that they deeply valued?
2. Brueggemann was constantly making connections at a variety of levels. What kinds of things does he connect that make his writing so rich?
3. Describe Professor Brueggemann's teaching approach. What were his goals in the classroom, and did he achieve them? How did students respond to him and why?
4. Describe the kind of God Brueggemann introduced to students. How is this God different from what they had learned about in Sunday school and church? What do you think about the qualities of Brueggemann's God? How are they similar or different to how you thought about God?
5. What is new from Brueggemann for your understanding of God? Where do you feel challenged by Brueggemann's views? Where do you feel comforted? Where do you have questions?
6. What did Walter's critics call him and why?
7. What was happening in the social context of the United States while Walter was writing *The Prophetic Imagination* that would eventually impact its reception by pastors and church members? What was it about Walter's story of the Bible that ministered to pastors and their congregations? How do you account for the long term sustaining power of this book?
8. When Kanagy asked Brueggemann why he loved the church, how did Walter respond and what do you think of his response?
9. Who are the theorists and theologians who influenced Brueggemann's theology in the 1970s? What was the influence of each on Walter?
10. Describe the religious context in which Walter was formed. What was German Evangelical Pietism? What were the primary values and beliefs that influenced Brueggemann across his entire lifetime? Is there anything you see in this tradition of value for today? If so, what, and why?
11. Walter's father, August, is a giant in Walter's life. What is the impact of August on Walter? What qualities in August has Walter sought to emulate? How is August connected to Walter's continued ministry to pastors?
12. What theological tradition was Brueggemann battling as a scholar? What did he name his approach? How was it different from the paradigm in which he was trained along with his peers of that time?
13. Brueggemann describes historical criticism as being moribund for the church. In his view, it had nothing to offer the church. How did his approach, and what did his approach, offer the church that historical form criticism did not?

14. There is an interesting connection between the method of interpretation Walter uses and his theological views of God. It reminds us of course that the tools we use to exegete the biblical text will necessarily impact the way we read the text and the way we see God. How would you describe the way you read the Bible? How has that influenced your views and beliefs about the Bible, God, and the church? Might it be time to change the tools or the lenses you use to read the Biblical text?
15. Walter Brueggemann has always maintained a modest sense of self. He has lived with the idea that he is always working from behind. How have these qualities and self-perception impacted Walter's work and ministry?
16. In what ways did Walter live on the margins as a child? How did this marginalization eventually impact his theology?
17. James Muilenburg had the greatest impact on Walter at Union Seminary. What did Muilenburg contribute to Walter's theology?
18. Liberation theology entered Walter's thinking in the early 1970s and would remain a constant throughout the rest of his career. How did liberation theology fit with Walter's formation as a child and young person?
19. How would you define what Walter means by prophetic imagination? Do you have a prophetic imagination? Does your congregation? What barriers get in the way of us hosting an alternative reality to the one that appears in front of us?
20. What are the most important takeaways for you from Chapter One?

Chapter Two: Where Prophets Come From

1. Why does Kanagy title this chapter “Where Prophets Come From”? And what does he discover in trying to address this question?
2. What are the qualities of the prophetic calling or gifting that Brueggemann exemplifies? And how are these related to his formation by German Evangelical Pietism?
3. What is your personal history with this thing called the prophetic? Does your faith tradition honor the office of the prophet and recognize it as legitimate?
4. How is the prophetic nature of Walter Brueggemann different from stereotypes we often have about prophets and their words? How does Walter’s prophetic calling compare with that of Jeremiah, Isaiah, and other Old Testament prophets?
5. Few people who I interviewed could define what Walter meant by evangelical pietism. And when I told Walter what I heard some people suggesting that he meant by the term, he emphatically denied it. Then he sent me an email so I would have it in writing. His definition opens this chapter. What do you think of this definition? How does it compare to your previous thinking of what evangelical means? Why do you think Walter was so insistent on this definition?
6. Brueggemann emerged as a scholar out of the Prussian Union that had reacted against scholarship. How does this make Walter a different kind of scholar than many of his peers?
7. Why has pietism had a challenging time existing in the modern world?
8. What contribution did the free mission houses make to the formation of the religious tradition in which Brueggemann grew up?
9. Kanagy argues that pietism represents a middle way between the Christian left and right. What do you think about this idea and what might it look like on the ground?
10. What about Walter’s family socialization most influenced him as a child and as an adult?
11. What experiences of abuse did Walter’s father experience at the hands of the church?
12. The Synod catechism was central to Walter’s tradition. What was it about the catechism that made it so influential in Walter’s calling? Describe the nature of the catechism.
13. What verse did Walter’s father confer on him at his confirmation? How was this prophetic in Walter’s life?
14. Walter says that he takes the Bible seriously but not literally. What does he mean by this? What do you think about the statement? How does it compare to how you have thought about scripture, or the way others do?
15. When the evangelical and reformed tradition merged with the congregational churches in the mid-20th century, it was great optimism that heart and hands had joined for God’s mission. It did not take long for pietism disappear from the UCC. What accounts for this disappearance?

16. Sociologists argue that all religions in the United States eventually become Americanized. German evangelical pietism is a case study in this phenomenon. Why does this occur?
17. What lessons from this chapter are most important for the current state of Christianity in America?

Chapter Three: Imagination Everywhere

This chapter focuses on Brueggemann's elevation to the presidency of the Society for Biblical Literature, the oldest and largest scholarly organization for biblical scholarship. In the chapter I describe the Presidential Address that Brueggemann gave and his anticipation of that address.

1. When Brueggemann says that "every text has an axe to grind," what does he mean in terms of the Bible and the writers of the Bible? Have you ever thought about this before? How does this change your reading of some biblical texts?
2. What is the axe that Walter is grinding and has been grinding for six decades? Why has that axe sustained such a long run in the church? What has enabled Brueggemann to be so prolific as a writer when he is grinding the same axe repeatedly?
3. Who helped Brueggemann to arrive at this climatic stage of his career and what exactly did they do for Walter and with him?
4. What accounts for the long-time marginalization that Walter felt or perceived in terms of his place in the Academy? How did his appointment as President impact that perception?
5. In what ways did Brueggemann pave the way for his own appointment as President of the SBL?
6. Walter had the opportunity to gloat during his presidential address. He could have told the audience "I told you my approach would win the day." Instead, he preached a sermon and led a Bible study that moved across six biblical texts. What surprised you about the message that he gave that evening in New Orleans?
7. What do you think about Walter's thesis that God shows mercy to empires, but empires also show mercy? How does this thesis line up with Walter's view of the sovereignty of God?
8. If you have read other Brueggemann books, are you surprised at the five he selects as the most important of what he has written? Which of these five have you read if any? What do you think are the most important books he has written and why?
9. Brueggemann shared with me that he most wants to be remembered most for his work on the Psalms of lament, and for the way that his work impacted the change in liturgy in congregations. He believes that congregations have created more space for liturgies of lament. Knowing what you do so far of Brueggemann's story, what if anything surprises you about his desire to be remembered this way?
10. Does your congregation have a way of sharing lament corporately? If so, what does that look like? If not, why not? What do congregations miss when they do not create

corporate forms of lament in their services? What might your congregation do to strengthen and enhance opportunities to lament?

11. Lament runs against the American optimism that is so pervades the church. But the Church of all places should be one where we can grieve, cry, confess, and mourn. What in our churches gets in the way of making this possible?
12. Brueggemann places a lot of emphasis on the dialogical nature of God. That God is always in dialogue with us. That it is the nature of God to be in dialogue. If we use words to make worlds then God is using words to make God's world also. In Genesis, God spoke, and the world came into existence. The apostle John calls Jesus the word of God. To what extent is this notion of God as dialogical new to you? How does believing in a dialogical God impact the way we relate to God, see God, and understand God?
13. Because God is living and free and dialogic, Brueggemann is uncomfortable with theological categories of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. These are sacred categories in much of the church. How does our view of God change if we rid ourselves of these categories?
14. One of the major pivot points for Brueggemann and his theology was his reading of Jewish theologians and their views of God. They saw God as a living agent, active and free. This God changes direction, and changes God's mind. This God repents. Brueggemann says this God is in turmoil. What are your thoughts about the qualities of God that Brueggemann identifies? Are there some that you are more comfortable with than others? Discuss.
15. Brueggemann says that he does not want to be considered a liberal hack by his emphasis on liberation theology, poverty, and economics, and even Marxism. Why are these things considered liberal and progressive in a church that bases its beliefs on the Bible? What biblical texts does Brueggemann use to support his growing view that God is concerned about economics and that we should be concerned about economics also?
16. Kanagy compares the prophetic imagination of Brueggemann to the sociological imagination of his discipline. How do these compare with one another? Walter describes prophets as social observers. With the connections between sociology and the prophetic?

Chapter Four: Pivoting Here and There

The notion of pivots became critical in writing Brueggemann's biography. I struggled to get deep within his soul and to find language that would draw him out. I knew that others who had interviewed him often tended to dominate, and he would simply defer to them and agree with what they said. But if this book was going to be about Walter, it had to be about Walter's voice. Struggling in prayer one morning, I read one of Walter's books on Jeremiah and discovered his use of the term pivot. He used it to describe how God pivoted and how God's people pivoted. So, I went into the next interview with this heuristic device in hand and simply asked Walter what were the key pivots in his life. Walter responded immediately and it became clear to me that using the language on Walter that he had created to use on the biblical text would be a key opening the well of his life.

1. Why has Walter faced rejection by many evangelical Christians and church leaders? What have they missed about Brueggemann and his theology? What did they assume about Brueggemann that is not true?
2. Why have Pentecostals, at least some, embraced Walter Brueggemann with more open arms than most evangelicals otherwise? What did Pentecostals see in Walter that felt familiar to them?
3. In this chapter I describe an individual named Marc who experienced Brueggemann's writing at Calvin College and then after years of ministry and fatigue from this ministry, walked into a church building and heard Walter preaching. What exactly did Marc hear?
4. What was the sermon title, the text, and the message that day? What was its impact on Marc?
5. What did many people in the audience not know about Walter Brueggemann that enabled him to preach such a powerful message about pain, suffering, grief, and lament?
6. How do you feel about Walter's belief that it is our task and calling and right to get in the face of God and demand that God be God? To demand that God keep God's promises? To demand that God awaken and come to our aid?
7. Brueggemann shows us that lament proceeds honest praise or genuine doxology. The church is often guilty of doxology or praise that is superficial because lament is never included in our liturgy or singing or scripture reading. What do you think?
8. What does Brueggemann mean when he calls on us to get down and dirty with God? What biblical examples can you point to where folks did just this? Have you gotten down and dirty with God? Why or why not? Can you share any examples where you did so and the outcome?

9. Brueggemann describes five pivots that were fundamentally important in his life. All these pivots he says were a turning from moralism to emancipation. What kind of moralism do you think he was talking about and what kind of emancipation? To what degree does this pivoting from moralism to emancipation challenge you, make you uncomfortable, cause you to disagree, or bring hope and freedom?
10. What accounted for Brueggemann's deep inner need to move away from moralism as he calls it? What in his formation contributed to the moralism he spent his life trying to escape?
11. Brueggemann finally came to peace with the fact that God had called him to the church, that his habitat was the church and not primarily the Academy. How do you think living in the church impacted Walters scholarly work, his preaching, and his writing? What might have happened to the quality or nature of his work had he decided that the Academy was his habitat?
12. One of his major pivots was a turning towards conflict theory or Karl Marx's teachings about inequality and marginality. In today's church, and in the United States as a whole, there is little tolerance for Marxist thought. Why is this the case and what do we lose by not considering the truth of what Marx taught regarding the development of societies, particularly industrial societies?
13. Walter found kinship with Jewish theologians and their views of YHWH. What appealed to Walter about their theology and how did it connect with where he already was in his thinking about God? What did his discoveries among Jewish theologians contribute to his understanding of the biblical text and the God of that text?
14. What is your most important take away from this chapter? What questions do you have after reading it?

Chapter Five: No Text—No God

The opening quote by Brueggemann that “it is the embarrassing things about the Bible give it the juice” is a classic Brueggemann line. Brueggemann believes that we must embrace the text and the God of the text as we have received it. That we cannot cut out the parts we do not like. That we cannot ignore the actions of God that we disagree with or that are offensive to us. To do that is to undo who God is as a free and sovereign agent. This of course has caused problems for Brueggemann for those who wish to challenge many of the texts that seem offensive to the modern era. Brueggemann has no time for such censorship.

1. Discuss Brueggemann's perspective that we must accept the text as it has been given to us. He also says that there is no God outside of the text, I assume as a way of again reminding us that we cannot make this God of the text in our own image. But we must grapple with this God. We must stay in dialogue with this God if we were to ever understand this God and God's actions. Where do you see the church being selective when it comes to teaching and reading the biblical text?
2. This chapter opens with one of Walter's students in ministry in a Presbyterian Church where there was resistance to her emphasis on reading the Bible and preaching from the Bible. But Pastor Clover persisted, and was successful in breaking down some of the stereotypes and biases regarding the biblical text. What about you and your congregation? How important is the biblical text to you? Do you read the biblical text? Do you read the entire biblical text? Why or why not?
3. Walter even has a problem with the lectionary because he believes it is shaped by people with an axe to grind. This means that some texts are inevitably left out of the church's reading. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the lectionary? What are some avenues for compensating for those passages that do not regularly show up in the lectionary?
4. What did progressives miss about Brueggemann's view of the text? What have evangelicals missed? Is it possible that Brueggemann's theological position could be an alternative to the left and the right? What might such a pathway look like?
5. I describe an experience in which a colleague of Walters from Luther seminary, Terry Fretheim, gave a scathing critique of Walter's efforts and his theological positions. What were Fretheim's gripes with Walter? What do you think of Fretheim's critique of Walter? What were sociological factors that may have influenced the differences between the two?
6. What was the fundamental conflict between Fretheim and Brueggemann and how do you assess for yourself whether it is the faithfulness of God or the sovereignty of God that most defines who God is?

7. What defined Walter's qualities as a mentor? Why was he so focused on mentoring new scholars and preachers?
8. I close the chapter by discussing three essays that Walter critiques quite courageously. What were his criticisms of these essays on the book of Jeremiah? How did his formation in German Evangelical Pietism inform his criticism? What other influences shaped his perspective of these three essays?
9. This chapter raises particularly important questions about the Bible in today's church. Where do you sense some conviction from what Walter has written and his beliefs about the Bible? Where do you have questions? What do you affirm about his views?
10. What might it look like for you to take the Bible more seriously? What about your congregation? Where might you begin to make the reading and study of the scriptures more central?
11. How did American Christianity, at least elements of it, get to the place where the Bible has such little status in our lives and congregations?

Chapter Six: The Secret

Kanagy argues that the secret to who Brueggemann is lies in his connection to God through Scripture and prayer. His son remembers him as “saturated” with God’s presence when he was a child watching Walter. I also suggest that if all we had left of Walter’s writing was his prayers, he would still be well-known for that genre of devotional reading. Indeed, his prayers as much as anything reveal the poet in Walter Brueggemann. Poetry and prophecy are often tied together in the Bible as well. The prayers in this chapter weave together in a wholistic way all of whom Walter is before his God.

1. What do you notice about these prayers?
2. Which of the prayers in this chapter are most meaningful to you and why?
3. Which of the prayers can you imagine to be most helpful and meaningful in your congregational setting?
4. Where do you see some of the major themes of Walter's work woven throughout these prayers, such as:
 - a. The sovereignty of God
 - b. Justice for the poor and marginalized
 - c. The dialogic nature of God
 - d. The freedom of God
 - e. Walter’s love for the church
 - f. Walter’s critique of the church
 - g. Lament and grief
 - h. The irenic spirit of German Evangelical Pietism
 - i. The interdisciplinary nature of his learning
 - j. His knowledge of what is happening in the world
 - k. The connections he makes across the biblical canon.
 - l. A sociological perspective
5. What surprises you, if anything, about Walter's prayer life?
6. How do the prayers reflect the prophetic imagination of Brueggemann?
7. Describe where you see the weaving of the biblical text into the prayers.
8. In what other ways do the prayers reflect what we have learned about Brueggemann? Do they reveal anything new about the man and his work?

Chapter Seven: When Prophets Go

In this chapter I try to step back and think about what we have learned from the story of Walter Brueggemann and what that story means for us currently. What was the value of the seed that Brueggemann carried and continues to carry for the church and society? How do we best steward what Brueggemann has planted? I begin the chapter with a story about Walter Brueggemann's presentation by Zoom to Sojourner magazine staff in which he received a standing ovation. And I connect Walter's theological work with the pragmatic, on the ground justice work of Jim Wallis and those around him. Like Brueggemann, Wallis is disillusioned with progressives as well as with the evangelical right. Wallis said this to me: "it is time not to go left or to go right but to go deeper into the biblical text." I wanted to end this chapter, and the book, by highlighting that the word of the prophet is more important than who the prophet is. Prophets will come and go but what they leave behind we must discern and respond to.

1. I began writing this biography as a way of trying to find a path forward for myself, one who was getting increasingly into hot water and facing resistance for my own prophetic words. I needed comfort that I was on the right path. I needed solace that I was not alone. Did I receive that comfort from the work that I did with Walter Brueggemann? What did I learn from Walter in this journey with him?
2. What have you learned in reading the story of Walter Brueggemann?
3. Walter told me that speaking prophetically or hosting the prophetic imagination is costly and few of us have the courage to do it? As you look at our society and church today, where do you sense God calling you to engage with a prophetic imagination? What is likely to be the cost, and do you have the courage to follow through?
4. What would congregations with the prophetic imagination look like? Can you point to areas in which your own congregation has hosted an alternative reality to the one that is in front of you? What has that cost you?
5. Congregations so often count the cost God's mission in financial terms, but a prophetic imagination counts a different kind of cost. More like the cost that Jesus paid. More like the cost that Martin Luther King Jr. paid. More like the cost that Mother Teresa paid. Or Bonhoeffer. Or Bishop Romero. More like the cost thousands of Christians throughout the world are paying today. To what extent is our metric of cost the wrong metric, and what might we measure to determine whether we are living in and ministering out of a prophetic imagination or not?
6. What do you believe that Walter Brueggemann has left us with to respond to? What has he said, taught, wrote, and preached that has most challenged you to make some change in your life or congregation?

7. I end the biography by again suggesting that we may well be in a Bonhoeffer moment where faithfulness to Christ may well demand more than we have been willing to pay to this point or than we have been required to pay. It is not clear to me that either the left or the right will be willing to pay the cost. If progressives have given up on the scripture, their cause is certainly not worth dying for. If evangelicals have been coopted by the political right, their alternative will be to fight rather than to die willingly. In the book of Jeremiah, the scribe Baruch, stands in for the remnant of faithful people who believed the promises of Jeremiah and acted upon them. Jim Wallis believes that we need a remnant people in this time of our American history. What would a remnant church look like today? What might Walter say that a remnant church looks like today? What does the biblical text tell us about a remnant church and its qualities? What may be the cost of being a remnant church in today's context?