

Q&A: On current political and ethical issues, why do we not hear God in the same way?

Anonymous asks:

I read with interest the series of Facebook posts sparked off by your post of the Christianity Today article. I think it is fascinating to see how Christians come to opposing conclusions from the same set of "facts".

For me, one of the biggest problems not just in the specific case of the USA but generally, is what we mean by "discerning the mind of Christ" or "listening to the Holy Spirit". I am fully in agreement with the article and your counter-arguments against the pro-Trump people. However, how do I know that this really is what God is saying to us?

The same can be said of other major issues on which the church is split. Each side is sure that they are listening to God. I think this conundrum is something that has got increasingly difficult over the 40 odd years of my Christian life. For example, in the early 70s, I think the evangelical world was pretty unified on the sexuality issue. We could dismiss pro-gay views as being part of the liberal wing. Now, I suspect that even the evangelical wing is probably in a minority in holding to traditional views.

Why does God not speak to everyone in the same way or rather why do we not hear God in the same way?

The Christianity Today article referenced is: We Worship with the Magi, not MAGA

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You

can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>

Thank you for this question. This was sent in a while ago, and the delay in my response comes from the fact that this is my second attempt at answering!



At the heart of it, your question is about *disagreement*. In particular, it's about Christians disagreeing on how to discern what God wants, what God wills, or simply what he is doing. In my first attempted answer I wanted to talk about epistemological differences – i.e. our understanding of how we *know* things – and then set our feet on the solid rock of God's revelation in Scripture and analyse our disagreements from there.

It wasn't a bad place to begin. From that perspective of Biblical truth we can form an opinion on whether people (including ourselves) are correct or incorrect with regard to doctrine or fact. We can also discern whether people (including ourselves) are wrong or right in terms of the spirit or character of our engagement. We can also reach for some conclusions about what things are *essential* or *primary*, and what things are secondary *adiaphora* on which we can disagree in unity.

On the matters you raise – Trumpism and sexuality – there has been much that has been written and said and I'm not going to rehearse it all again here. If our intention is to *disagree*

well while holding to a robust epistemology, there are some good examples. A number of years ago I wrote a lengthy multi-part review of a book called *Good Disagreement?*. One of that book's contributors, Andrew Goddard, has written very recently on the same topic of sexuality on the Psephizo blog. With regards to US politics, a recent podcast from Premier Christian Radio, *Unbelievable? Is the US Church in the grip of political idolatry?* with Shane Claiborne & Johnnie Moore, is useful.

The reason for my second attempt at an answer is that I think your question might be pushing a little deeper. **It is a good thing to analyse the *nature* of disagreement. But you are asking *why* it happens.** Why does it seem that God is not speaking clearly? If God's truth is real and foundational, why do Christians differ so significantly on what we think that truth is? And if that clarity is not there, *how* can I truly know anything?

Conflict and disagreement about God's will amongst God's people is self-evident, biblically, historically, and in our present moment. Our trust in God cannot depend on their being a lack of disagreement. So we must find the right place for it in our thinking. To that end, I discern two types of conflict, which I will tentatively call *unfaithful* disagreement, and *faithful* disagreement.

The first category of **unfaithful disagreement** is needed because sometimes God's truth *is* clear. The conflict arises simply because there are those who wish to be faithful to what God says, and those who wish to dismiss it, disobey it, or harden themselves to it in some way.

Many of the conflicts in the Bible are of this sort, which makes perfect sense when viewing Biblical history from the perspective of hindsight and a greater awareness of the grand scheme of things. There is story after story of various people whose eyes are open to God's truth being opposed by those who

are hardened or spiritually blinded in some way: from Cain & Abel and those who opposed Noah, through the mumbling moans of the Israelites against Moses, to Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who killed the prophets and stoned those sent to her (Matthew 23:37). This is truly the conflict of light vs darkness, truth vs lie.

These conflicts cannot be truly resolved by compromise or finding the balance of things. In such conflicts even if an "agree to disagree" can be found it resolves to a *diminishment* of unity, rather than an *increase*.

Take the issue of state authorities, for instance. With regards to Trump the normal "common ground" issues of how God ordains secular and civil leadership (e.g .in Romans 13) are not really the issues at hand. What is under dispute is whether some particular anointing, even of a Messianic kind, attaches to Trump, the nature and extent of spiritual warfare and prophetic utterances about Trump, and the intertwining of gospel proclamation with the ascendancy of one man, and the violent actions of a mob in Washington. These are matters of right and wrong, light and dark.

With regard to the issue of human sexuality; there is a lot of complexity and nuance, and things to understand and embrace in the middle of it all. Nevertheless, sometimes the dispute *does* encroach onto matters of fundamental clarity, and we do face (on both sides of the politics, to be honest) fundamental matters of idolatry and grossly negligent handling of the Scriptures.

To some extent, then, this answers something of your *why* question. Why do we disagree? Why do we claim God's support on different sides of various debates? It is simply the human predicament: We long to stand in the light and truth of God, and at the same time our rebellious self-centred hearts oppose it. That essential conflict is therefore within society, within church communities, and even within our own

souls. In our sin, we do not hear him as we should, therefore we disagree. This should not surprise us.

The response to it is *hope*. One day the Father of Lies will be defeated, and the One who is the Way, Truth, and Life, will shine and all will be revealed.

However, there is also a form of **faithful disagreement**. It rests on the reality that God made us good, and he also made us *finite*. There is *goodness* in our epistemological finitude; it is part of God's good design that we are limited in our knowledge of the truth. Those limits are a dynamic part of us that *draw* us towards a deeper knowledge of God, a deeper *worship*.

It's one of the reasons I am wary of Trumpist-like prophets who sometimes speak of getting a "downloaded" word from God. Biblical and personal experience, rather, indicates that God's truth is something that we have to *learn*. After all, Jesus had *disciples*; i.e. he had *students*! He promised that the Spirit would *lead* them into all truth (John 16:13). And through the various modes of ministry and gifts within the church, a process of *maturity* is expected (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Some of us will know certain aspects of God's truth differently than others. Some of us will be better versed in the Scriptures. Some of us will have had different experiences to bring alongside those Scriptures. In our learning there will be *difference of opinion*. But that doesn't mean that that *process* of learning is flawed.

Consider the ideal: Adam & Eve walked and talked with God in their innocence; their growth and maturation sprung, in all goodness, from that relationship. (Interestingly, the fall is portrayed as an attempt to seek knowledge on their own terms). Similarly, Jesus gathers his disciples and they sit at his feet where they receive the words of eternal life (John 6:68) – and that was good! It was good when they first started

being taught by him, and it was good after three years of walking and talking. And, we might note, it didn't stop them having disputes – some of them painful – which were, in themselves, opportunities for Jesus to teach them, yet again.

At our best, this is what we see in the “disputes” of the church. They lead to greater understanding, and deeper worship. Paul talks to the Bereans and they run to the Scriptures with *eagerness*, (Acts 17:11), to test what they have heard. The leaders of the church come together in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 and they ponder together Peter's experience with Cornelius, and the truths of the Law, and their own eyewitness learning from Christ himself, and they resolve the dispute about the inclusion of the Gentiles. They don't pitch these things against each other to find some shallow overlap; they wrestled *in their faithfulness* to Scripture and the direct teaching of Jesus, in order to grasp what was happening in their experience. From this wrestle came a greater fathoming and proclamation of the gospel!

This isn't some mystical magical thing; it's the ordinary experience of the gospel. Personally, I remember how one of the greatest joys of my theological training was the lunchtimes debates of one topic or another – well-hearted differences of opinion that forced me back to the word of God, to wrestle, to learn, and, in the end, it led to greater worship.

Why do we not hear God the same way? Because, in his divine wisdom, our ignorance is a call to worship, as we bring each other to sit at his feet.

How, then, do we know, with the issues that are rising in our own time now, **what sort of conflict we're dealing with?**

I will always do my best to take heed of the disputes around me – even the matters of Trump and sexuality. I may learn something from them, you see. Here's the framework I use to

parse that:

1. **Is this dispute a matter of fundamentals?** Are we seeing, here, a matter of spiritual *opposition* to God and his word. Have we slipped from asking “What does our Lord say?” to “What am I going to say anyway?” In this case, I either call out the error as constructively as I can, or I walk from the dispute; it cannot lead me to greater worship.
2. **Is this dispute a secondary matter?** That is, does what I have learned from God’s word stay the same on either side of the debate? I will enter into the matters if I have the inclination or energy to clarify my own opinion, but only if it’s edifying. Paul warns us away from needless controversies (Titus 3:9) and about needlessly offending our brother or sister (1 Corinthians 8:9).
3. **Is this dispute taking me to sit at God’s feet once more, to learn from his word, and explore his heart?** At this point I will attempt to receive the dispute as a gift, even if have to expend some energy and suck up some humility. In this moment it can be a great joy and delight that we do not all hear God in the same way; there’s something more to learn from his Word.

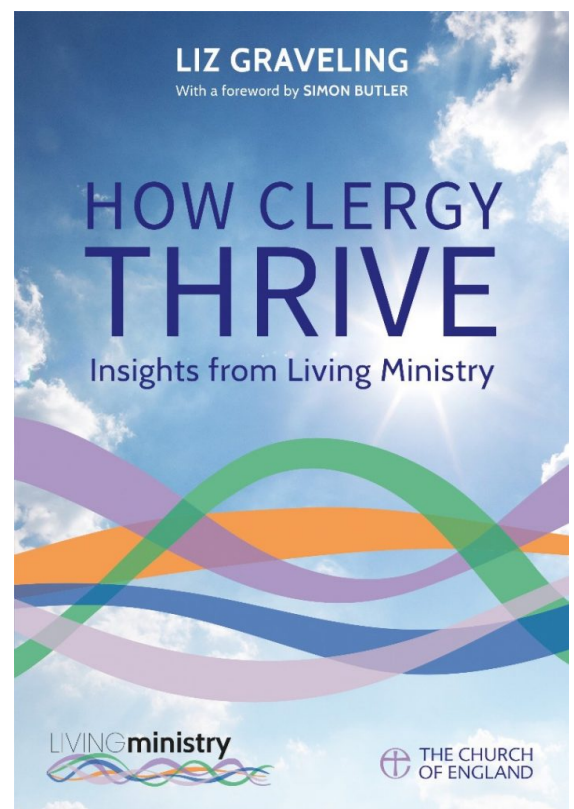
The difficulty with the matters that you raise – Trumpism and sexuality – is that in different ways, with different people, on different particular topics, I have found that all three parts apply. Sometimes it’s a matter of opposing what is blatantly wrong. Sometimes it’s needless controversy. Occasionally it is edifying dialogue. You will see all three aspects at work simultaneously, and because of that, much wisdom is needed.

Thanks for the question.

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Review: How Clergy Thrive – Insights from Living Ministry

How Clergy Thrive is a short report in the Church of England that was released in October 2020. It provides insights from the *Living Ministry* research programme, a longitudinal study into clergy wellbeing that has been following four cohorts of clergy and their families. It is substantial research and author, Liz Graveling, presents it well. It pushes in the right direction but, unsurprisingly, falls short of a fulsome exhortation for the cultural and structural changes that are really needed.



I have attended enough “resilience” sessions at clergy conferences to approach a report on this topic with a healthy cynicism. This report avoids many of the normal pitfalls.

For instance, clergy wellbeing is often reduced to a matter of individualised introspection and the promotion of coping mechanisms. Refreshingly, this report recognises that “wellbeing” is a “shared responsibility” (page 7). It notes that the “the pressure to be well”, itself, “can sometimes feel like a burden”. Indeed, “clergy continuously negotiate their wellbeing with institutions, social forces and other people: family members, friends, colleagues, parishioners, senior clergy and diocesan officers, as well as government

agencies and market forces.” We clergy live in a complex web of ill-defined social contracts. We are often the least defended from the inevitable toxicities. A recognition of this *system* is a good foundation.

Similarly, the multifaceted approach to “vocational clarity” (page 9) deals well with actual reality. There is always a gap between the “calling” of ministry and the “job” of ministry, between the way in which the Holy Spirit gifts someone to the body of Christ, and their institutional identity. In my experience, the wellbeing of a clergyperson is essentially shaped by one’s emotional response to that gap. Wellbeing is encouraged by stimulating and supporting a clergyperson to reach an honest, holistic, and healthy equilibrium. It is undermined by arbitrary training hoops and merely bureaucratic forms of institutional support. The short discussion on where annual Ministry Development Reviews are either helpful or not (page 9) or even damaging (page 10) indicates that this dynamic has been recognised. The many “questions for discussion and reflection” are also helpful.

It’s impossible, of course, to read something like this without evaluating my own wellbeing and the health of the institution to which I belong. I have my own experiences, of course, including some significant times of being unwell. Here, however, my attention has been turned to the cultural and structural problems that are revealed.

Take the surveyed statement “I feel that I am fulfilling my sense of vocation” (page 11). It is noted that “79% agreed they were fulfilling their sense of vocation.” This sounds reasonable. However, I’m not sure if that positive summary is quite what the data actually suggests. Only 47%, less than half, of the respondents can fulsomely agree with vocational fulfillment. The other 32% in that 79% can only “somewhat agree”, and a full 20% is neutral or negative.

In many professions this picture might be excellent. Retention

rates for teaching, for instance, indicate a 30% loss after five years.¹ We must, however, make a distinction between an ordained vocation and most other professions. In ordained life, one's profession is not just one facet of life, it is holistic (page 7); it captures many, if not all, of life's parts. *Integration* of those parts is key to being healthy. How can it be, then, that 53% of our clergy are not able to fully find themselves within the life of the church? From my perspective, this speaks of a consumeristic culture in which clergy are service-providing functionaries rather than charism-bearing persons. Perhaps it simply speaks to an unhealthy culture in which it is tolerable for square pegs to be placed in round holes despite the inevitable trauma. Whatever the case, this isn't about the church institutions *doing* wrong things, it's about innate ways of *being* wrong; we need to change.

We see glimpses of this same sense throughout. Consider the relative benefits of the activities that are meant to support clergy (page 14). The more positive responses correlate to personal activities or activities that are outside the institution: retreats, spiritual direction, mentoring, networks, and academic study. The institutional supports such as MDRs, Diocesan Day Courses, Facilitated Small Groups and so on, are of relatively less benefit. In fact IME Phase 2, the official curacy training program, scores worst of all! I cannot speak to IME – my curacy was in Australia – but the rest of the picture certainly matches my own experience.

This is observation, not disparagement. I generally sympathise with those in Diocesan-level middle management. They have tools and opportunities that look fit for purpose, but they so often appear to run aground on deeper issues they cannot solve. Dissatisfaction then abounds. A related observation is this: It appears to me that a common factor amongst the poorer scoring forms of support is that they are often *compulsory*. This invariably amplifies dissatisfaction. Appropriate

accountability and commitment aside, compulsion usually reveals an institution propping itself up through confecting its own needfulness.

Again, when “sources of support” are considered (page 31), the ones most positively regarded are non-institutional: family, friends, colleagues, and congregation. Senior Diocesan Staff, Theological College, and Training Incumbent score low. This is understandable and perhaps it is unfair to make this comparison; no one is expecting the Bishop to be a greater source of support than one’s spouse. However, the question wasn’t about support in general, but about “flourishing *in ministry*”, and the picture remains stark. Note, also, that the most negative response that could be offered was a neutral “not beneficial.” If a negative “unhelpful” were counted, the picture might be even starker.

My point is that *cultural* problems are being revealed. If only 63% of respondents could agree, at least somewhat, that “the bishop values my ministry” (page 49) then this is not so much a problem in our bishops, and certainly not the clergy, but in the institution in which we all embody our office.

Remuneration and finances are also revealing. 45% of the respondents are “living comfortably”, but 81% of the respondents had “additional income” (pages 39-40) which, I suspect, relates mostly to the income of a spouse. To some degree, this is all well and good; a dual income usually means a better quality of life. Nevertheless, the sheer disparity in financial wellbeing between clergy couples with one or two incomes cannot be ignored. The provision of parsonage housing is a factor; in other occupations accommodation costs generally rise and fall along with household income and dampens the disparity. More importantly, however, is how this reflects the *individualisation* of vocation, and the shocking degree to which clergy spouses are simply invisible, for better or for worse, within the Church of England. It is also my experience, both personally and anecdotally, that the

wellbeing of couples who are both clergy is not well assisted in our current culture. This is especially so for those called to “side by side” ministry, who share a ministry context and usually only one stipend. It’s well past time to allow for couples to be licensed and commissioned *as couples*, like many mission agencies do. We need the means to share remuneration packages and tax liability, and, at the very least, the provision of National Insurance and pension contributions for the non-stipended spouse. Our current culture does not allow for this.

Finally, this study would do well to extend its work to take into account the effects of incumbency on wellbeing. I wonder what proportion of the respondents, given their relative “youth” in career-length terms, have reached incumbent status? Incumbency comes with a certain level of stability, power, and protection. Attached to incumbency are checks and balances on institutional power. Incumbents are more clearly party to the social contract between clergyperson and institution. Associates, SSMS, permanent deacons, and the increasing numbers of crucial lay ministers are not as well protected. They *do* “find themselves overlooked or under-esteemed” (page 35). The increasing prevalence of non-tenured and part-time positions in the Church of England is a structural concern that *does* effect clergy wellbeing. We need more work here.

How Clergy Thrive has painted a useful picture. There is scope for even more insight. The benefit of longitudinal research is that the story of wellbeing can be told *over time*. The testimonials in this report reflect this and are very helpful. It is unfortunate, however, that most of the data is presented as a snapshot census-like aggregation across the cohorts. An accurate picture of how wellbeing ebbs and flows as a career progresses would help us all. If we knew, for instance, at what point in their career a clergyperson is most likely to not be thriving, we could respond. If clergy wellbeing suddenly drops, or if it slowly diminishes over time, that

would teach us something also.

Like the vast majority of reports, this one struggles to answer the question of “What do we do about it?” How *do* we help clergy thrive? In the end, it appeals to an acrostic: THRIVE (pages 56-57). It’s not bad. It’s healthy advice that I’ve given to myself and to others from time to time: Tune into healthy rhythms; Handle expectations; Recognise vulnerability; Identify safe spaces; Value and affirm; Establish healthy boundaries.

These principles are applied, to a small degree, to how the existing system might do a few things differently. In the main, however, they describe what clergy have managed to do for themselves. It’s a story of *technical* changes for the institution, but *adaptive* change for the clergy. We need the reverse of that.

The life of a clergyperson exists in an impossibly complex interweave of pastoral, strategic, and logistical expectations. Technical changes in an institution often only add more expectation and more complexity. We have a structural problem. We have forces vectoring through things that are too old, too big, or too idolised to be modified. Instead, they are dissipated through the clergyperson, and other officeholders, but *not* the system itself. Personally, I’ve learned to find my place and peace with much of the machinery, and to look for the best in the persons who hold office. I have done this, in resonance with many of the testimonials in this report, by trusting real people when I can, and by not giving myself, or those I love, to the church system itself.

It’s not enough for the ecclesiastical machine to *do* things better. It must *become* different. Take heed of the testimonial on page 25 – “I wouldn’t really trust my diocese to make them aware that I have a mental health issue.” Imagine, instead, that the diocese was for that person a fount, a fallback, a refuge, or a hope! In short, imagine if the church

(ecclesiastical) really aligned with being a church (theological). That's the redemption we need. I wonder if the "big conversation" alluded to on page 6 will help.

Like most intractable problems, the hard thing is not about noting the problem. It's not rocket science; we "just" need real Spirit-filled personal nourishment and discipleship. It's the getting from here to there that is difficult. Difficult, but not dire. There are times when the right people are in the right place and it just works. For myself, I hold to a glimpse of how things might come to be:

What do clergy need to thrive? They don't need an "MDR", they need to be *overseen*: a regular conversation with a little-e episcopal someone who can cover them, is for them, and who has their back.

What do clergy need to thrive? They don't need strategic plans and communication strategies, they need to be treated as the little-p presbyters they are: brought into the loop, entrusted with substantial work without being second guessed, and given space to be themselves without having to watch their back.

What do clergy need to thrive? They don't need a "remuneration package", they need to be *provided for* with decent housing that's fit for *their* purpose, enough money to feed their family and prepare for the future, and an assurance that spouse and children will also be backed and supported without needing to beg or "apply."

Footnotes

1 – National Foundation For Educational Research, 2018