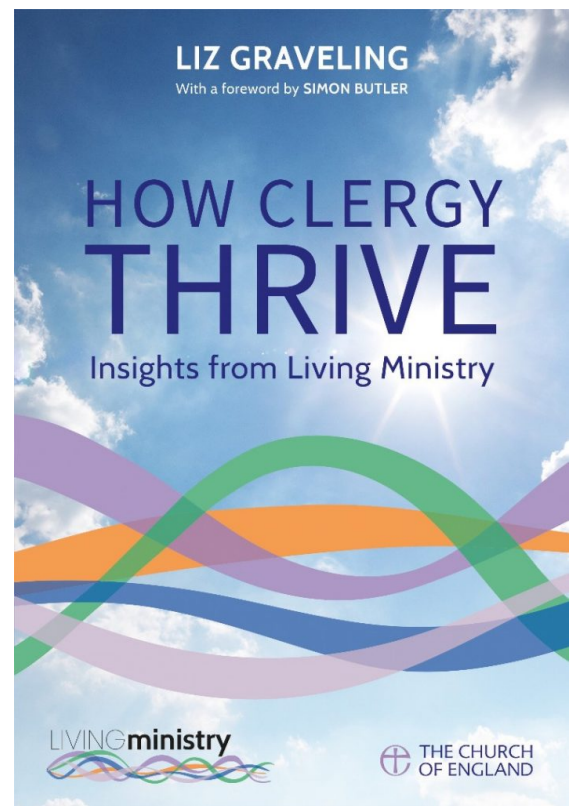


Review: How Clergy Thrive – Insights from Living Ministry

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."

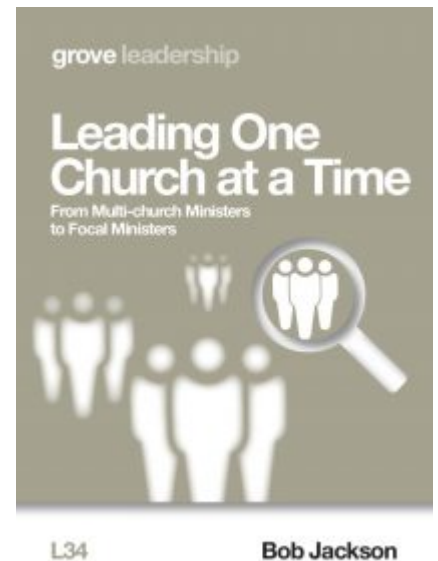
Footnotes

1 – National Foundation For Educational Research, 2018

Review: Leading One Church at

a Time – From Multi-church Ministers to Focal Ministers

Grove booklets are helpful little tools for the ministry toolkit. They are often insightful and informative. Occasionally, like this one, they are somewhat frustrating, because the content should be bleedingly obvious.



Church researcher, Bob Jackson, posits the question, “As clergy numbers fall, is there a better leadership model than multi-parish incumbency?” (rear cover), and the answer is basically “Well, of course!” As church attendance declines, and the relative cost of “employing” a stipendiary vicar increases, the number of parish churches per clergy has also been increasing. Combining and amalgamating parishes sometimes works, but, in general, it stretches the mode of ministry to a breaking point, spreads the vicar too thin, and accelerates the decline. Jackson has researched the numbers (page 7).

So what do we do instead? Jackson proposes the use of “Focal Ministers”: Individuals, who are not expected to carry the burdens of incumbency (more on that later), but who can *focus* on the local congregation, the local community, and lead the rhythms and practices of the local church towards properly contextualised gospel ministry. Statistics show (page 9) that this is generally effective. This is not surprising. “Human communities rarely flourish without a hands-on leader. Leadership is best embedded, not absentee” (page 5).

Jackson spends his 28 pages helping us to imagine life in the Church of England with such Focal Ministers in place. He unpacks the benefits, identifies some of the pitfalls, and articulates some good practice. While opening up the “Range of Focal Ministry Options” (page 16), he maintains the “irreducible core idea... that one person leads one church” (page 3).

Taken alone, it is a simple premise, i.e. it is bleedingly obvious. The complexity and the relative obscurity lies in its juxtaposition alongside existing ecclesiastical structures, culture, and expectations, particularly in the Church of England.

To reflect on this, I have come from two different angles.

The first angle relates to what I have experienced and observed over the years.

In my *experience*: I am used to recognising and raising up what Jackson might call Focal Ministers (FMs). In one of my posts, the lay reader of many decades experience was clearly exercising local ministry, and much more effectively than me as I was stretched between three half-time vicarly posts; it was a no-brainer to encourage her towards increased ministry, and, eventually, ordination. In another post, Gill and I identified a young man with clear giftings and call, as he was raised into leadership we did ourselves out of a job. I could go on and on in delightful reminiscence about the numbers of coffees we’ve had to encourage people into areas of ministry (leading, preaching, pastoral care, etc.) While not all of these would be exactly the same as Jackson’s FMs, they were in the same ethos. I’m not trying to blow my own trumpet here, but isn’t this the norm? Isn’t this how ministry works? How else do you do it?

Similarly, I have been able to *observe* various forms of focal ministry. The Diocese of Tasmania experimented for many years

with “Enabler Supported Ministry” (ESM) in which a “Local Mission Support Team” (LMST), which usually included an Ordained Local Minister (OLM), was called by the local congregation, recognised by the Bishop, and provided with a stipended “Enabler.” It differs slightly from Jackson’s model (it has a local *team*, not a focal *minister*; it is overseen by a non-authoritative *Enabler* rather than an incumbent in a “mini-episcopate oversight role” (page 8)). When ESM worked, it worked. When it didn’t two things often emerged: 1) The LMST collapsed into one person, usually the OLM, who effectively became a Focal Minister, and 2) there were times when the Enabler needed to be given some authority in order to resolve conflict etc., and so were often also appointed as Archdeacon-Mission-Support-Officers. I don’t know if Jackson has looked at ESM (or it’s “Total Ministry”, “Every Member Ministry”, or “Local Collaborative Ministry” equivalents) but he’s arrived at a model that aligns with the outcomes.

The second angle for my reflection relates to my recent history in the Church of England. My current Diocese of Sheffield is in the midst of significant structural shifts. The development of “Mission Areas” with “Oversight Ministers” and “Focal Ministers” is a key part of the strategy. These issues are therefore very much live for me (as a recipient more than a participant in the current moment) and it has stimulated some thoughts for what to embrace, and also to avoid:

1) Focal Ministry requires a cultural change, but the danger is we only grasp it structurally: Jackson promotes FM as a way of eschewing the “pastor-and-flock model and professional ministry” (page 5). This is a strange contrast; turn over “pastor-and-flock” and you don’t quickly have a “Focal Minister” you have a flatter structure with no clear hierarchy. At best this could look like effective partnership, perhaps within a fivefold shape. At worst, (and I’ve observed this), it looks like

bland egalitarianism articulated as “we don’t need anyone to lead us” and often feeling directionless and, ironically, insular. If Focal Ministry can find the balance between assertive leadership and collaborative inclusion, then that’s fantastic, but that’s firstly a cultural issue not a structural one. There’s no reason why “normal” ordained leadership should not also find that balance. Similarly, without cultural change, it will quickly reduce back to a pseudo-vicar and their flock.

2) Focal Ministry raises questions about what ordination is all about. This is not a bad thing; it raises good questions! In Jackson’s model, Focal Ministers are charged with being the “public face of the church, [the] focal leader in the community, [the] enabler of the ministry of all, [the] leader in mission” (page 20), and he can imagine them leading a congregation of up to a 100 or so (page 26). On page 23, he suggests that Focal Ministers could get started by “raising the standards of church services,” looking “for people who have left the worshipping community” to hear their story, and using festival services as a means for growth. All of that is a great description of what *ordained* ministry looks like on the ground! If it isn’t, then what on earth are we teaching our ordinands to do? The only aspect of ordained ministry that Jackson doesn’t really mention is theological reflection and sacramental ministry. But don’t we also want our FM’s to be theological formed, and aren’t we giving them the oversight (at least) of the celebration of the sacraments in the local context? So, conceptually, how exactly *is* Focal Ministry anything other than a mode of ordained ministry?

We need to think about how Focal Ministers are “searched for, trained, and supported” (page 25). One would hope that Focal Ministers would be assisted in discerning their particular vocation, provided with training in theological reflection and pastoral skill, and offered tangible support

(perhaps even some remuneration where possible) so that they are free to exercise their ministry. How is this not the same concept as the pathway to ordination and the provision of a living? It may be that our training pathways for ordinands are not helpful for FMs, and that we should provide them with more flexible and contextual options. That doesn't raise questions about the training of FMs; it raises questions about the possible general irrelevance of ordination formation! If ordination formation is relevant, why wouldn't we offer it to FMs? If FMs don't need it, why would we require it of ordinands?

In Jackson's model, there isn't really a difference in kind between Focal Ministry and Incumbency, it is a difference in degree (in his chapter 4 the only difference between "FM" and "IN" is that FMs only have one congregation and an INCumbent can still have multiple). The church offers a more rigorous (and defined) form of support to Incumbents, and a more flexible (but presumably cheaper and missionally adaptive) form of support to Focal Ministers, but they are both (in the truth of the concept) exercising the essence of ordained ministry. This is not a bad thing. However, it *feels* awkward because the Church's statutory wineskin can't easily cope with the adjustment, and we have to develop new terminology to get it there.

3) My only real concern with the model, therefore, is in its implementation. Jackson speaks of the need for "official diocesan policy" when it comes to this (page 25). He speaks of "a discernment process" for FMs "as there is with readers and OLMs" (page 25). He suggests that a "Focal Minister training syllabus will be needed, perhaps prepared nationally" (page 20). Some form of process is needed, of course, but the extent of it worries me.

The joy, and beauty, and actual *point* of FM is the local connection and flexible local adaptation of ministry. As soon as you have syllabi and processes that are imposed

from a distance (even nationally!), they risk becoming hoops to jump rather than resources to release. Such processes often hinder local adaptation by insisting on irrelevancies, and they undermine recruitment of FMs for whom that is onerous. Too much centralised expectation and we might as well replicate (or just use) the ordination streams and send FMs off to the so-called “vicar clone factory.” We need to learn the lessons from what happened (or didn’t happen) with the aspirationally contextual Pioneer Ordained Minister schemes of 15-20 years ago.

It’s at this point of FM discernment and training that Jackson should have emphasised the role of the Incumbent Oversight Minister. Surely it is in the “mini-episcopal” incumbent that you entrust a level of discernment for who may or may not be invited into the FM role? Surely someone who has been through the “full” ordination program (and subsequently provided with the living) will have been equipped to offer formation and training to those with whom they share the work? An incumbent is both aware of the local context, and connected by their office into the wider accountability; incumbents are key to the framework working. In fact, here is the point of distinction between the two roles of incumbent and FM: incumbents are called to *raise up and form*, in addition to joining the focal work on the ground.

In conclusion, Jackson has given us a useful resource. The prospect of a framework that aligns with what he presents excites me. Not least of which because “it rescues incumbents from impossible job descriptions, enables some to work at a more strategic level and others to enjoy a more fruitful ministry with direct responsibility for fewer churches” (page 27). But I still slightly shake my head. This is not a new solution to a new problem. This is simply a framework around the sort of work we should have been doing anyway. No matter the exact form or nomenclature, we need to get on with it.

Review: Setting God's People Free – A Report from the Archbishops' Council

"This report concludes that what needs to be addressed is not a particular theological or ecclesiastical issue but the Church's overall culture. This is a culture that over-emphasises the distinction between the sacred and the secular and therefore fails to communicate the all-encompassing scope of the whole-life good news and to pursue the core calling of every church community and every follower of Jesus – to make whole-life maturing disciples. We will not raise up cadres of godly leaders unless we create communities of whole-life disciples." (Page 2)

The logo for 'Renewal & Reform' is set against a green rectangular background. It features a stylized white plant with two leaves above the text 'Renewal & Reform' in a white serif font.

The Archbishops' Council has released this report under the *Renewal & Reform* agenda. Hot off the presses (it is dated February 2017) it is refreshingly and provocatively titled "Setting God's People Free" and is based primarily on the work of the Lay Leadership Task Group. It is perceptive in outlook, insightful in analysis, but self-admittedly limited in application. It provokes a degree of excitement with just a hint of cynicism.

From my "outsider" perspective, reports like these from the Church of England have stimulated and encouraged mission and discipleship in other contexts. This was the case with significant works such as *Mission-Shaped Church*. It is similar here; the leadership of the church is saying what needs to be said, giving a voice and lending language to those

who desire a deeper Christian community that is more active and effective in doing the things that matter. The simple *encouragement* that this gives to those on the edge cannot be underestimated.

With my slowly developing “inside” view, these documents now seem a little starker. It is still immensely encouraging that these things are being said, but there is also an awareness of why they *need* to be said. A report like this reveals behind (or in front of) it some sense of the inertial malaise that can be found in the Church of England. It envelopes a justifiable sense of *urgency*.

So what does this report give us? It’s not really anything revolutionary. It’s a couple of things that make deep sense, and, if taken seriously, come attached with a whole bunch of difficult but positive implications:

*This report identifies the need for **two shifts in culture and practice** that we see as critical to the flourishing of the Church and the evangelisation of the nation.*

1. Until, together, ordained and lay, we form and equip lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life in ways that demonstrate the Gospel we will never set God’s people free to evangelise the nation.

2. Until laity and clergy are convinced, based on their baptismal mutuality, that they are equal in worth and status, complementary in gifting and vocation, mutually accountable in discipleship, and equal partners in mission, we will never form Christian communities that can evangelise the nation.

We believe that these two shifts would represent a seismic revolution in the culture of the Church. The first is about the focus of our activity and the scope of our mission, the second is about the nature of the relationship between clergy and lay. They are both vital. And they are both rare.

(Page 2, emphasis theirs)

This is an exemplary act of ecclesial self-reflection. These assertions about church culture are based on some decent quantitative and qualitative analysis. It is a conversation that is well and truly at the missional and cultural level. Personally speaking, we have been bewildered in our observation and experience of how these issues are usually avoided or mishandled. This includes misalignment over the meaning of crucial language such as “discipleship” and “mission.” This report not only clarifies terms (“Discipleship is not a course of study but is determined by circumstances”, page 7) but unpacks what that clarity reveals:

Today... the Church of England finds itself in a situation where the significant majority of the 98% of people who are not in ordained ministry are neither adequately envisioned, nor appropriately trained, nor consistently prayed for, nor enthusiastically encouraged for mission nor ministry in the ~90% of their waking lives that they do not spend in church related activities. (Page 3)

Yes, huge numbers of lay people serve in positions of influence and leadership in the church, community, workplace and society. However, few claim to have been given a theological framework or to have the confidence to express biblical wisdom, in both word and deed, in these contexts.

We will not raise up cadres of fruitful godly leaders in every sphere unless we create healthy communities of whole-life disciple-making disciples. (Page 4)

What is needed, first and foremost, is not a programme but a change in culture. A culture that communicates the all-encompassing scope of the good news for the whole of life, and pursues the core calling of every church community and every follower of Jesus – to form whole-life maturing disciples. And a culture that embodies in every structure and way of working the mutuality of our baptismal calling and the fruitful complementarity of our roles and vocations. (Page 5)

Our contention is that the motivation for Christian leadership must arise not from a slightly greater willingness to 'do jobs' but from a compelling and positive vision of the redeeming work of Christ for all people. It is when people become aware of the great things that Christ has done for them and wake up to the gifts that the Holy Spirit has bestowed on them that a joyful and willing leadership emerges, for it is out of communities of disciples that cadres of leaders will appear. (Page 8)

To all this I give an understated Anglican "Amen, brothers and sisters!" Here is a vision for a missional church that resonates with our own hopes and passions.

It is not an unrealistic vision. The report is aware of "constraining factors" and rightly names as primary a "theological deficit" (page 13) of "robust and incisive... thinking" (page 14). The counter offer is a "theology of the laity as grounded in the centrality of *mission* and *evangelism*" (page 14) made with full awareness that parochialism and other factors work to prevent such vision from "achieving long-term currency, let alone significantly informing policy and practice across the Church of England" (page 14).

Mission is not about removing people from the world to seek refuge in the Church... but about releasing and empowering all God's people to be the Church in the world in order that the whole of creation might be transformed and restored in Christ. (Page 14).

I am sympathetic to, but not entirely yet convinced by, the engagement with the clerical-lay divide as a primary problem.

The report portrays both sides of the frustration and that is useful: some congregations try to make their clergy into messiahs, some clergy already think they are! Nevertheless, the engagement with the issue assumes and perhaps unhelpfully reinforces the division. **After all, the clergy are a subset of**

the laity, not a separate category. And one of the problems in our formation of clergy is that we don't also (and especially) *disciple them as people*. A discipleship culture is rarely prevented by a lack of theological knowledge; it is resisted when leaders are unable to share of themselves because of insecurities, fears, emotional immaturity, inexperience with suffering, or simple lack of exposure to the deeper things of life with Jesus.

Few churches have developed the kind of learning culture that would illuminate the resource and support that is required to develop lay people. Few churches are equipped with the kind of 'action reflection' approaches that we see in Jesus' disciple-making and in best practice adult learning models in wider society. (Page 18)

Good reports make recommendations and here “eight levels of cultural change” are proposed (page 19). They are only really applicable to “Dioceses and the National Church”, which is understandable as these are the atomic ecclesial components from the point of view of the Archbishops' Council. I am not particularly familiar with the sort of machinations that happen at that level, but the principles seem sound: theological vision, increased lay voice, episcopal priorities, centralised resourcing, liturgical development, structural reform and so on. I'll be watching the commentary on these things with some interest.

There are two recommendations for action in the short-term that attract me. The selection of “pilot dioceses” (page 26) to model the culture has me hoping that my own Diocese of Oxford will be one! And, the provision of resources through a “national portal” (page 26), particularly “the facility for people to join small affinity/learning groups for support, discussion, and accountability” recognises a crucial lack of communal learning that *should* be happening at Parish, Deanery and Diocesan level, but usually isn't.

The emphasis remains however: *cultural change is required*. And that is a fraught exercise.

I have sat on enough boards and committees in my time to understand that clarifying the situation and identifying the problem is one thing; putting forward achievable and appropriate proposals is another. This is only amplified when the problem is a cultural one. There is always an aspect of catch-22 and chicken-or-egg. How do we use culture to change culture? Are the available options – the levers that can be pulled – able to *transcend* the culture or are they products *of* it?

There are all manner of obstacles to cultural change. It will take more than this report to overcome them.

For instance, cultural change is resisted by allowing symptoms to control the remedy. Our natural tendency is to alleviate symptoms, and it is often not efficacious. Consider how the report points out that there is “no sense of any centrally-coordinated strategy for the support and development of lay leaders across the Church” (Page 11). This is clearly a symptom of something that’s wrong. But it may not follow that the answer is to rely on a “centrally coordinated strategy.”

Rather, it is likely that cultural change is achieved by some other means, which then *results* in a centrally-coordinated strategy. What comes first? Here, while not wanting to “institute a top down approach” (page 1) we still have a “clear implementation plan” (page 9) from a high-level body! Catch-22.

In general, there are other obstacles to cultural change.

There is the presumptive existent: “We exist, therefore we’re on the right course.” There is semantic deflection: “Of course we’re doing X; when we do it it looks like...” By embracing the buzzwords the real engagement is avoided. We’ve seen this happen with words such as “discipleship”, “fresh expression”, “leadership”, “vision”, “mission”, and

“emerging”. Cynicism can easily abound.

I’m not sure the report totally avoids these obstacles. For instance, in trying to articulate a picture of lay ministry in terms of the “sent church” there is an emphasis on volunteerism. However, as I’ve mentioned elsewhere, there is often a cultural disconnect between the social action of individual parishioners and the movement and mission of the church to which they belong. The report mentions Street Pastors (page 10), but how much can we say that that ministry belongs to the institutional Church? There is a danger of stealing the fruit of others in order to avoid our own barrenness.

Nevertheless, I was both encouraged and moved by this paper.

I am grateful to know that people are thinking these thoughts, and even dreaming these dreams. It’s the right conversation in the right room, and it speaks a vision that needs to spread to every room in this House of God.

Canterbury Tales

Gill and I had a wonderful opportunity to be in Canterbury last week.

Canterbury Cathedral had made a “Canterbury Cross” for our former church, St. David’s Cathedral in Hobart, and it was being handed across to friends of ours, one of whom is a QANTAS pilot, for transport back to Tasmania.

We were warmly welcomed by Dean Robert and Receiver-General and introduced to the stonemasons who had carved the cross



from stone taken from the South Transept during the current restoration works of the South Window.

I was unexpectedly moved by the Cathedral itself. We have visited a number of ancient buildings now, and I was expecting to be impressed. But, more than that, I was *moved*. The atmosphere was warm and friendly and the history was palpable.

Some churches are mausoleums, or grand statements of power. This was a place to pray and worship.

The Anglican Church is a very old tree. When you explore it you encounter living branches and dead wood, new buds and once majestic boughs now riddled with dry rot. At Canterbury I found some deep and living *roots*. It moved me.

And all the more as our visit coincided with the now-much-talked-about meeting of the Anglican Primates. I had found myself praying for these leaders as their meeting started. I am an international Anglican and the Communion is precious to me. It is, of course, much damaged and stained at the moment, but my heart for it remains: Oh Lord, let not this entity, this thing, this confused mass of institution and history and culture and politics, dishonour you; but fill it with life, and renew and restore it; let it truly reflect your one holy catholic and apostolic church.

There was every chance that my visit to Canterbury would coincide with a full and final expression of its demise. I've been watching the growing fractures for over a decade now. I know the issues at hand. I know something of the personalities involved. As I walked past the place where the Primates were meeting, I prayed for them, and not least for Justin Welby. Because, after all, and particularly in the light of the tone and demeanour of an unfortunate many who have responded to the meeting, he needs it:

1 Corinthians 4:9 For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death,

because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. 10 We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. 11 To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, 12 and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; 13 when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day. (NRSV)

As far as the outcome of the meeting goes, I am, myself, cautiously encouraged. In my mind the outcome is more in-line with the sense of communion than anything we've had from the Instruments in a long long time. What dismays me is the deliberate lack of grace and understanding with which the outcome has been articulated and communicated by many.

Autonomy does not mean independence and there are, therefore, some things that we hold in common. What those things are can only be determined collectively and collegially. It is now clear that the Anglican understanding of marriage is of that order. Whether or not the Americans have done the right thing in changing their doctrine of marriage, what is clear is that they deliberately did it alone, without adequately attending to their brothers and sisters either within or outside of their immediate jurisdiction. Irrespective of the rightness or wrongness of their position (for that is a totally different debate) it was certainly not right for them to bring their innovation to the Communion as *fait accomplis*. To this was added derogation of those who then sought to grapple with the now wounded relationship, accusing them of separatism and embarking on a path of litigiousness and deposition and therefore excluding them. It was not just appropriate, but *necessary*, for Abp. Foley Beach to be at this meeting.

If we are to be emotionally and ecclesiastically honest, this

uncollegiality couldn't simply be ignored. Justin Welby is right in his language about "sanctions" and "consequences."

The Primates cannot impose sanctions and tell a province what to do; but they can determine the nature of the collective, communal path, and express the consequences of TEC's behaviour in the communal life of the Communion. This is what we have now. And it is a measured, mature response.

Very few reactions to the decision have been similarly marked.

As an evangelical committed to talking at the centre, I am saddened by much of the rhetoric. I find myself thinking what I would say in various hypotheticals:

To my more conservative brothers and sisters: Trust God the Holy Spirit. Allow God to work. Don't try and play this out and get ahead of what God is doing.

Don't work on the next bunch of ultimatums. Don't slip into the belligerence of "The Primates didn't do enough" or into the triumphalism of "See, they're never going to change."

Don't just be *correct* in your analysis or your theology, be *right* in spirit, and generous in relationship. And be very careful, because sometimes you don't speak the truth in love, and rather than sharing the gospel, you end up convincing others of the lie that the grace of God is peculiarly inaccessible to them. I'm preaching to myself here.

To my more progressive brother and sisters: Trust God the Holy Spirit. Allow God to work. Don't try and play this out and get ahead of what God is doing.

Please pause and take stock. The way forward is not to belittle or tear down with accusations of cowardice or bigotry. Certainly avoid the aspersions towards African culture that have now been prevalent, some of which have been uninformed and bigoted. Be your best, with that sweetness of spirituality that can truly teach and lead the

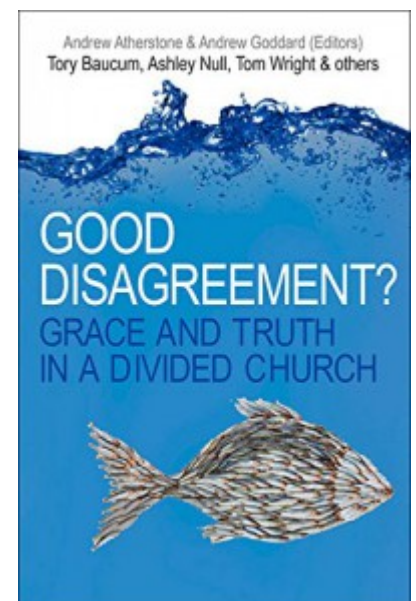
rest of us. On the issue at hand: if changing our doctrine of marriage is truly what is needed to pursue the will of God for human flourishing, then your task isn't to defeat the other side, but to convince us and bring us with you; isn't that the essence of Communion, trusting in God?

Personally speaking, you haven't convinced me, and I do not believe I am hardened of heart.

As Gill and I exited Canterbury Cathedral last week, a cold wind whipped up from what was a gentle breeze. It seems to have become a storm, and that's a shame. Because the Primates took us to an honest but painful place, a step towards, not away from, good disagreement. We don't know what happens next. But God *is* good.

Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 10, Mediation and the Church's Mission

I am continuing with my chapter-by-chapter, essay-by-essay review of *Good Disagreement?* Previously:



- Part 1: Foreword by Justin Welby
- Part 2: Disagreeing with Grace by Andrew Atherstone and Andrew Goddard
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- Part 8: Good Disagreement between Religions by Toby Howarth
- Part 9: From Castles to Conversations by Lis Stoddard and Clare Hendy & Ministry in Samaria by Tory Baucum

We've arrived at the final chapter, and some final thoughts from me. This chapter is by former-barrister, now *mediator*, Stephen Ruttle. He gives us language to *describe* the current troubles, and a sense of how far or little we have come and are likely to go.

As a mediator Ruttle is, like many of the contributors to this book, a firm centrist. While he admits that this could include a propensity to avoid disagreement (p208) and sit on the fence, and while he recognises that he is not impartial on some theological or moral matters (p207), his presentation of mediation as "assisted peacemaking" (p195) after the way of Christ which makes it missional (p204) has great merit. For those who aspire to speak across the centre there is some wisdom to glean here.

Ruttle's approach is strengthened by his realism about outcome and his focus on process:

"This chapter assumes that there are profound disagreements between Christians on important issues and that these

disagreements are a fact of life which are unlikely to be resolved, at least in the sense that everyone will come to a common viewpoint. The questions that then arise are: How well can we disagree? Can we live together or not? If so, how closely? If not, can we separate with blessing rather than with cursing? Can we love each other despite these disagreements? How well can we “do unity”?” (p197)

In particular, his conception of “agreement” as being able to incorporate anything from full reconciliation to amicable separation means that his thoughts can be applied to the current troubles. If only “total agreement” is on the table, the conversation is already over. But if the ground under dispute is about good *disagreement* then there are things to talk about: honesty about the current situation, recognition of existing separation, re-connection where possible, honest exploration of faults and wounds, agreement about the extent of possible future separation, practical and symbolic implications etc. etc.

Similarly, his presentation of the mediation process is also insightful, and illuminates the current Shared Conversation strategy more than much of the rhetoric around them does. On page 213, he outlines the process as: “GOSPEL” – **G**round rules... **O**pening Statements... **S**torytelling... **P**roblem identification... **E**xploring possible solutions... **L**leading to agreement (p213).

It’s a crazily complex situation of course, but from my observation the current process is passing through S (storytelling) and beginning to get honest about P (Problem identification). Many are much further on that that of course.

It’s still unclear what solutions and forms of agreement are possible in the current situation. Ruttle defines possible successes as (in order of depth):

A) Participation (p214); B) Ceasefire (p215); D) Resolution

of the defining issue (p215); E) Resolution of the underlying issue (p215); F) Restitution (p215), G) Forgiveness (p216), H) Reconciliation (p216), I) Transformation (p216)

Depending on how “resolution” is defined and if “restitution” could incorporate some structural/institutional response to reduced common ground, I can see the possibility of a way through to G). This is further than what the cynic in me suggests is possible; and my caveats are deliberate!

This chapter also taps into some frustration. Ruttle gives some advice for participants in mediation to “step back” and work out the real issues, and to “slow down” (p209).

Particles of wisdom such as these are already apparent, albeit chaotically. Many have “stepped back” over the years – we know what the issues are, and their epistemological underpinnings. And many have “slowed down” and persisted in meeting together through indabas and Covenant processes; the issue has been hot since 2003 and it’s cutting edge has been keen for many years before that. At some point there is also wisdom in not “drawing it out.”

Ruttle’s realism also connected with me on a personal level.

As I read the following description I was recollecting the cost I counted at a particular time when I was the man in the middle.

It can be very lonely, marooned in the middle in a sort of no-man’s-land. I find myself increasingly stretched as I continue this work, particularly where I have my own opinions and judgments on the rightness and wrongness of the issues at take, or the people involved in the mediation. (p206)

The biggest difficulty in applying Ruttle’s words to the current circumstances, however, is this: who exactly is our mediator? We do not have a mere fracas between neighbours, or a financial dispute in which an impartial third-party can

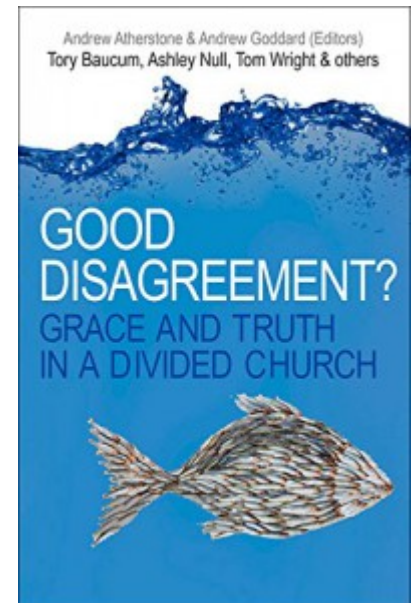
enter in. The issues at stake here are at the depths of a shared ecclesiology, our very *identity* and how it is expressed in following Christ.

It is here that Ruttle's allusion to Christ's mediatorial work breaks down a little. Yes, Jesus came to cross boundaries, and bring together former "enemies" (just read the first three chapters of Ephesians!). But he was not a mediator in the way Ruttle describes his work. Jesus also *spoke*, he spoke truth, and called us to follow him. He doesn't *pick* sides, he *defines* the side.

And so this chapter brings us to the place where we have gone again and again in this book – the epistemological question: how do we *know* what Christ is saying? How do we seek God together? The only satisfactory direction – and what I hold is the *Anglican* direction – is to return to and come under Scripture, not merely locatively, but attitudinally. The extent to which we are unable to share in that posture is the extent of our troubles, and that is what we must deal with, and deal with it well.

Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 9 From Castles to Conversations & Ministry in Samaria

I am continuing with my chapter-by-chapter, essay-by-essay review of *Good Disagreement?* Previously:



- Part 1: Foreword by Justin Welby
- Part 2: Disagreeing with Grace by Andrew Atherstone and Andrew Goddard
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- Part 8: Good Disagreement between Religions by Toby Howarth

I've encountered the two most helpful chapters of this book. Both of them are personal experiences of good disagreement *in practice*. Both of them bring a thorough grounding in the irenic gospel way. In one case there is agreement to disagree. In the other, structural and doctrinal separation occurs, but relational grace abounds.

The first chapter is **From Castles to Conversations** written by Lis Goddard and Clare Hendry who have been published as interlocutors on the question of female ordination. Here are

two people from two sides of a very heartfelt theological fence, and they wrote a book together.

They also write this chapter together, in alternating sections in the first person. The characteristics that have come to the fore throughout the rest of this book – honesty, trust, vulnerability – are embodied here. But what is also clear is the foundation on which their gracious interaction stands: the authority of Scripture. They may disagree on how Scripture directs them, but they agree that it is the only place to look for direction. Goddard writes:

For us, good disagreement was based on mutual trust that the other person was open to the challenge of God in Scripture as we were. (p156)

They bring openness and honesty and incredible vulnerability.

As Hendry points on on page 160, the implications for each of them if they were to change their mind would be immense! They were willing to risk that in honest engagement. They responded to each other fulsomely, and approached themselves with humility. This was human, spiritual, *devotional* engagement. Goddard writes again:

I can anticipate situations where I may conclude that someone is profoundly wrong, but I cannot anticipate circumstances where I would regret getting to know them, spending time listening, allowing myself to be challenged to return to Scripture and to my knees. (p161)

Writ large, this is the wonderful essence of *semper reformanda*. Honest conversation, constantly challenged to return to the Word of God in Scripture.

One would hope, therefore, that it can be quickly applied to the current troubles. But it can not be so readily applied, and not just because “every new issue we face is different

because the layout of the ground is different" (p167).

Hendry and Goddard shared an epistemological common ground, a common view on *how* they would seek together, a covering that gave them protection, and direction.

In particular, and this is an instructive point for those leading the Shared Conversations, they realised that *experience*, even well-shared experience is not an adequate foundation for good disagreement. Hendry writes:

If we spoke only from our experience, and allowed that to be our authority for holding the positions we did, it would be unworkable. It closes down conversation, as we would either hold back from saying things because we didn't want to hurt each other or end up undermining each other. We needed a reference point from which we could evaluate what we both thought and believed, and that had to be God's word. Because we were both allowing our experience to come under its authority it was possible to be honest and vulnerable, to trust each other and properly engage and debate with each other. (pp156-157)

It's the epistemological question again. The common ground of "how do we know?", "how do we seek?", "how do we walk together?" remains tenuous in the current concerns about human sexuality. Both Goddard and Hendry hold a similar concern:

Lis: As we face new realities, we need to be clear what our baselines are, where we stand as we talk, how we disagree.

Clare and I were able to come out of our castles and know the Bible was, for both of us, the central, key authority on which we built everything else... If that priority is not held in common, then the ground shifts. (p167)

Clare: I would find it hard to work closely with someone whose teaching I believed to be unbiblical on central issues, such as denying the atonement, or undermining the uniqueness and divinity of Christ, or adopting a lifestyle rejected by

Scripture. I could not in all good conscience say, "That's fine. You believe that and I will believe this, and it's all OK", if it was something that undermined the gospel. Equally, it would be hard to work closely with someone who did not take the authority of Scripture seriously. (p167)

Nevertheless, we are encouraged to not "stay in our groups", and reminded that "it does not mean that by engaging someone else's viewpoint we are necessarily condoning it" (p168). The reduced common ground in the current troubles may have a number of implications, including having "dividing well" as a possible constructive outcome and/or methodology. But what is needed, as is always the case, are people who know who they are, where they stand, and why, and who are able to genuinely **speak across the centre**, whether it be a simple scratch in the ground, or an impassable chasm.

The second chapter is from an American perspective of a church that has been through the painful process of departing the The Episcopal Church (TEC) in the US. Truro Anglican Church is now part of ACNA, was subject to litigation from TEC, and has subsequently lost ownership (but not use) of its property. Its a definitive story of the mess that was consequential to the events of 2003.

Tory Baucum, who is Rector of Truro (and a Canterbury Six Preacher), brings his ability to speak across the centre. He looks to the actions of Jesus in approaching the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 and explores it in some depth. The exegetical framework is intriguing and insightful, wrapped up in the word "nuptial" (see p175) in which Jesus spiritually woos the woman towards covenantal renewal.

One could even say she is "Samaria incarnate", divorced from her covenantal people and excluded in shame. Samaria itself is embodied in her multiple alienations (p176)

For the current purposes, Baucum expresses speaking across the centre as a willingness to do what Jesus did: to “enter Samaria” and offer grace before truth, to approach with *receptivity, humility and reciprocity* (p180).

There are also lessons from church history. His comparison of responses to post-Reformation conflict is helpful: Des Cartes who internalised faith, and De Sales who engaged with generous relationship (p184) across the Catholic-Reformed divide. It informs my current cross-cultural existence; I am learning that the natural British mode is so much more Cartesian than Salesian!

But in the end it is Baucum’s actions that make his lesson.

Despite the litigious circumstances he explains how he reached out to his local Episcopal bishop in relationship.

This relationship was reciprocated, and there have been grace-filled outcomes. It is instructive that this has not been dependent on reunion, and it wasn’t even dependent on the resolution of legal dispute! Truro Church remains structurally and doctrinally separate, but:

We are no longer a church at war with others, even though our commitment to orthodoxy is stronger and our standards of holiness are higher than during our days of division. We are not a church that simply wishes to cohabit with differences.

Instead we are a church that seeks to give life to our adversaries just as we do to our family and friends. The same gospel that teaches us marriage is the union of husband and wife in the bond of Christ’s love also teaches us to be peacemakers. (p192)

It’s an excellent example, and an enlivening framework. It only raises one concern, and that is an implied paternalism.

The risk is this: to “enter Samaria” is to presuppose a somewhat asymmetrical situation: as the Jesus-figure, we offer grace and truth to the shame-ridden woman figure. That is, we

speak with grace from a presumption of holding the truth. I suspect it would work if both parties came together with the same asymmetry, in balanced, opposite directions – but it could also be a barrier.

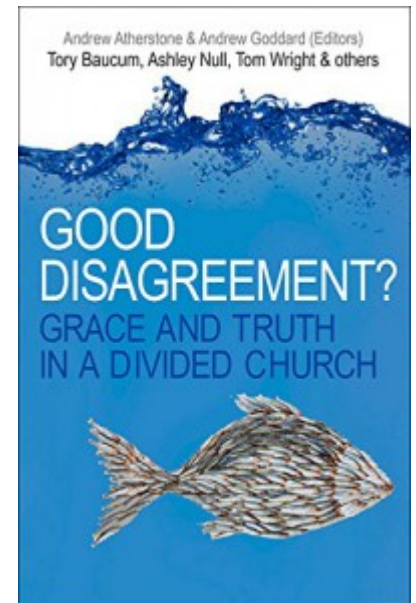
It is a similar dynamic to this: I know of a Christian leader who “entered Samaria” by genuinely engaging with a prominent gay activist. At one point, on a public stage, he felt lead to give this activist an affirming hug. I understood the intention, but it could also have been taken as paternalistic: you are broken, you need a hug.

Baucum, Goddard and Hendry have ably demonstrated that it is possible to speak across the centre. It is something that is essential to good disagreement. But it’s not simple, it does require trust on both sides, and with it being dependent on others, it runs the risk of failing. There are pitfalls, likely mistakes, and the risk of misinterpretation. The outcome may not be all that is hoped for. But it is necessary, and they have proved it in practice.

Next: Part 10, Mediation and the Church’s Mission by Stephen Ruttle

Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 8, Good Disagreement between Religions

I am continuing with my chapter-by-chapter, essay-by-essay review of *Good Disagreement?* Previously:



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To be frank I found this chapter to be frustrating. In my mind there's two approaches to interfaith interactions: the "hide yourself" strategy, and the "generously be yourself" strategy. The first is, at its end, is a form of nihilism. The second is honest but difficult.

There is much to admire in Bp. Toby Howarth's approach in this chapter. A generous gospel is apparent. The frustration lies in what I see to be some small, but significant, mis-steps.

Right up front, he recognises gospel distinctives and imperatives:

Some believe that religious disagreement is essentially illusory. If, they say, we could only see deeply enough and clearly enough the essentials of our superficially differing faiths, we would understand that we really all agree... My assumption in this chapter is that there is real substantial difference between religions... Not only do we believe and behave differently, many of us would like to see people from other religions change so that they believe and behave as we do, converting to belong to our faith community. (p132)

I wholeheartedly agree with this. In the aftermath of the Martin Place hostage-taking in Sydney late last year we encountered this assumption of illusion. I wrote at the time:

So when I stand in unity with my Muslim neighbours, it is not because we have been able to transcend our differences, it's because we have found within (informed, shaped, and bounded by) our world view a place of common ground. And so the Christian doesn't stand with a Muslim because "we're all the same really" – no, the Christian stands with the Muslim because the way of Christ shapes our valuing of humanity, our desire to love our neighbour, and even our "enemy" (for some definition). I can't speak for the Islamic side of the equation, but I assume there are deep motivations that define the understanding of this same common ground. Take away that distinctive and you actually take away the foundations of the unity, the reasons and motivations that have us sharing the stage right now.

The attempt to render religious differences as illusion is therefore incredibly illiberal and actually antagonistic to a healthy, harmonious, multi-religious society. I'm glad Howarth affirms this.

Similarly, Howarth's experience are beneficial contributions to the more general "good disagreement." In this series of reviews the importance of *honesty* has been mentioned a number

of times. Here Howarth reminds us that this necessarily includes *emotional* honesty, even *vulnerability* and admissions of fear.

The consideration of the Non-Violent Communication (NVC) approach is therefore helpful. It “encourages people... to listen not only to others but also to their own feelings and needs” (p136). This is necessary to ensure that we are not mishearing others: I have often encountered those who are emotionally reacting against what they *think* my position is, not what it actually is; I should avoid doing the same.

Vulnerability also puts one’s own emotional reactions out in the open, where they can be assessed and addressed. This cuts across and defuses bigotry. I attempted to reflect on this during the divisive 2012 same-sex marriage debate in Tasmania, but it was a one-sided exercise.

The current mode of good disagreement in the Church of England is the Shared Conversations process. To the extent that this achieves constructive **honesty and vulnerability** it’s a necessary step for good *disagreement*. I doubt it is sufficient for actual *agreement* on the issues at hand. In the short-term it may actually lead to an increase in pain, because honesty and vulnerability fully articulates the *cost* of a position or prospective decision. Having had one’s vulnerability fully acknowledged, and genuinely comprehended, there is no sense in which the wounds can be covered by ignorance; decisions will need to be made in full knowledge of the potential hurts.

In the interfaith scope Howarth recognises this reality; the tensions of maintaining relationship with the Hindu community in the light of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s commitment to evangelism (pp137-138) is a great example. The consequent act of maintaining relationship, even sharing meals, with the Hindu community is delightful. But it doesn’t remove the offence, it merely mitigates it. It’s a generous, gracious, *neighbourly* response.

The reason why good fences make good neighbours is because they protect against *encroachment* and thus provide a place of safety from which to be gracious. Irresolvable differences can be left in perpetual abeyance only when there is a degree of separation, as there are between religions. Unfortunately, in the current internal conflicts about Scripture and sexuality, we are dealing with conflict in the family, where there is not enough separation to prevent encroachment, and so the potential for gracious interaction is reduced.

There is therefore a degree of inapplicability of these interfaith thoughts to the current conflict. This is compounded by a few mis-steps that I think Howarth exhibits:

Firstly, he fails to avoid **a false-dichotomy between story and doctrine.**

Story is always present in religious disagreement. Sometimes we pretend that it isn't... In my experience, male religious leaders are particularly prone to addressing difference in this way. We look at texts; we discuss doctrines. (p136)

His attempt at a both-and ("while this important... it often needs to be complemented" p137) reinforces story and doctrine as essentially competitive, requiring a balance. His caricature of Trinitarian presentation on page 138 may be accurate in some circumstances, but he has himself flattened the experience of doctrine. It is not enough to fill it out with reference to the historical Nicene narratives, but by the Trinitarian experiences of everyday folk in the here and now.

Doctrine fills out story and story fills out doctrine!

Doctrine gives me language and understanding in which to live out my story. My story grounds my doctrine and pushes me to mull and mull until it is real and applicable. We don't need story to balance out doctrine; we need our doctrine filled out with the real world, and our experience of the real world filled out with lively doctrine.

Secondly, he doesn't adequately deal with the reality that **it takes two to tango**. What do you do in dialogue if the other side won't talk, or won't come to the same place of honesty and vulnerability?

I admire this sentiment:

Foundational to the different approaches that I have referred to here is a commitment to the often slow and painstaking work of developing relationships, especially by listening to the other person's story and sharing one's own. (p139)

But this presupposes that the other person is willing to share, and willing to listen. At what point is it *inappropriate* to give yourself over to another? Mark Durie, who regularly dialogues with Islam in the Australian context, considers how even generosity can be misinterpreted negatively. Similarly, there are many who see the ever-increasing illiberalism of progressive politics, and the misuse of anti-discrimination law in particular, as removing a safe-place for the sharing of a traditional point of view. I would hope that many would err on the side of risk-taking vulnerability, but how do you protect against possible entrapment?

And finally, there is the dangerous and self-defeating direction of **hiding the gospel** for the sake of engagement.

Howarth does not eschew Christian distinctives. He values "persuasion and conversion" (p144) and notes that "not all conflict is destructive" (p145). Nevertheless he does slip from the "generously be yourself" mode to the "hide yourself" mode.

The problem is that of the elevation of abstraction. This is when Jesus is reduced to a particularisation of an abstract gospel. For example, it is common to hear logic along the following lines: Jesus loves people, therefore we are called

to love, therefore if we all love one another then your philosophy and my Christianity are essentially the same.

Jesus is used as a particularisation of an abstract aspiration, in which differences are illusory. The gospel actually operates in the opposite direction: We are called to Jesus, Jesus loves (in fact, *defines* ultimate love), therefore we love as Jesus loves.

We see hints of this abstraction when Howarth uses Jesus to particularise the abstract desire to not “focus on dividing communities along religious lines rather than fighting the poverty and oppression itself” (p147). We see hints of it again in the exposition of the Samaritan woman when “God is present, in Christ, as the walls come down.” (p148) Jesus has become the particularisation of the abstract divinity of torn-down walls. Similarly the covenant encounter of Jacob with God in Genesis 28 (p149) is taken out of context, applied to Jacob’s later interactions with Esau in Genesis 33, and so covenantal divine encounter becomes a particularisation of abstract brotherly reconciliation.

This no mere nitpick. It’s a difference that is at the heart of cross-purposes in the current debate. One side moves from the abstract (“How do we love, accept, and include?”) and defines them by Christ (“By following him”); the other moves from Christ (“Jesus loved, accepted and included”) and absolutises the abstract (“We must follow the path of love, acceptance, and inclusion”). The difference is subtle – both mention Jesus – but substantial. In one Jesus is the goal, in the other he is simply a particular form of a larger concept.

In one Jesus defines and contrasts, in the other he simply informs. Same language, different meanings. Without recognising it we cannot disagree well.

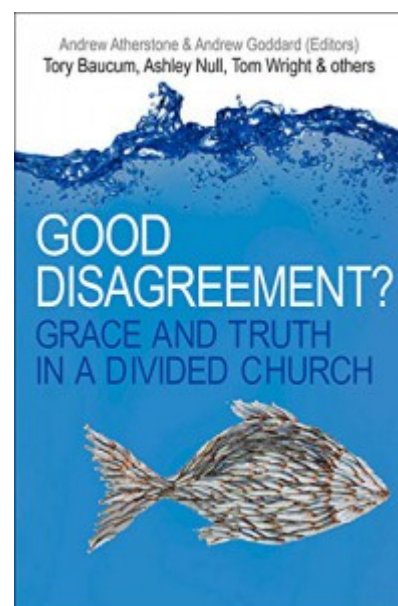
In conclusion, there are some valuable insights in this chapter. It challenged me at a number of points to examine my feelings and motivations, as well as my thoughts about such things as establishment and the role of the state in religious

affairs. But in the end, there was frustration. I'm all for kenosis, and empathy, and generosity... but in the end we are still who we are, defined by Jesus, and that is the starting point of dialogue; awareness of self. If we try to examine dialogue from afar, if we confine ourselves to objectivity and mediation from the abstract, we lose our very sense of identity, and have nothing to say. And silence is very rarely good disagreement.

Next: Part 9: From Castles to Conversations by Lis Stoddard and Clare Hendy & Ministry in Samaria by Tory Baucum

Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 7 Ecumenical (Dis)agreements

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- Part 5: Pastoral Theology for Perplexing Topics: Paul and Adiaphora by Tom Wright
- Part 6: Good Disagreement and the Reformation by Ashley Null

This chapter is the first in this book to exceed my expectations. The focus is less on the division and more on the possible ways forward. It is not prescriptive, it simply gives a potted history of ecumenical movements, and the descriptions are insightful for the present concerns.

The helpfulness of this chapter shouldn't be a surprise. I observed earlier that there are many ways in which the Church of England appears to act as a conglomerate of churches already. It's not absolute of course, there are many things in common particularly at the episcopal level, but it is not a stretch for the dynamics to apply. It is interesting, for instance, that the authors see fit to put constructive "liberal-evangelical" dialogue, such as that between David Edwards and John Stott who are both Anglicans, within the scope of ecumenism (see p115).

Three observations:

1) The most helpful characteristic of ecumenical interactions is that of *honesty*.

Good ecumenical interactions do not presume full agreement, and dialogue often serves to "bring areas of disagreement into sharper focus in order to clarify the real sticking points." (p117)

This is *good disagreement* in the sense that it is actually *disagreement*. It is honest and does not demand a pretence. A holding together of both unity and truth is the right aspiration, but unity is *not* constructed of it's own

bricks. Unity's material comes from discussions on truth:

The result of honest conversations between divided churches may be that different positions are shown to be incompatible and contradictory, and therefore the divisions must remain. This does not make the conversations fruitless but, on the contrary, pinpoints where change is necessary for unity to proceed. (p117)

Of course, avoiding a pretence is easier when it's different churches talking. But between Anglicans, who share, for instance, a common language of prayer, it's a lot harder. Some collective honesty about differing semantics would bring us closer to the more constructive dynamic described here.

To this end, *confessionalism* can be significantly helpful.

When done well (a big caveat), it clarifies meaning, it removes pretence, it allows conversation. I was told once of an Australian Bishop of a non-conservative variety who, to the surprise of some, welcomed the Jerusalem Declaration that arose from GAFCON. His response was, without any hint of disparagement, of this kind: "Now we know where you stand and we know where you're coming from. That is helpful."

Irrespective of whether this anecdote is true or not, that's the sort of attitude that advances things.

Confessionalism risks clarifying the divide (which may be fearful to some), it may even risk the "split" (whatever that means), but without it we have an inhibiting lack of clarity.

If there's anything I've learned from my own experience, if an honest appraisal of difference is not achieved, and if possible separation is not acknowledged, or even embraced, there is likely no room for reconciliation at all.

2) Separation doesn't preclude all forms of unity.

I was struck by the reference to Francis Schaeffer's idea of "co-belligerence", "that churches can go into battle together

on specific issues of social concern, without the need for doctrinal agreement.” (p114)

I like the term “co-belligerence” and have seen it in action.

In my time in Tasmania I was involved in the response of churches to what became known as the “social tsunami” of 2013 in which a radical socially revisionist state government attempted to impose a whole swathe of divisive legislative changes. It was a most ecumenical experience – I met with everyone from across the entire range of Christian expressions, from Roman Catholics to Quakers, from Pentecostals to Presbyterians. Someone expressed it this way: “I thought we’d be in this corner fighting by ourselves, and then I turned around and there were all these others with us!”

We were being co-belligerent. The doctrinal common ground was thin, to say the least, probably limited to the very basics of what the WCC of churches provides (see p24) and yet there was a substantial form of unity.

Similarly, I count as dear friends many who differ from me on points of theology. There are many things about which I think they are incorrect, and, in some circumstances, worthy of being opposed. Yet, despite this, I am convinced of a shared spirituality. We pray to the same God. We trust in the same Christ. There are times when we are separate, and firmly so!

Yet we can bless each other, even if we cannot bless each other’s position. (Of course, the flip side is there are people who are *correct* doctrinally, but not *right* in spirit, but that’s for another time).

There are many things where Anglicans truly do act as one.

Advocacy for refugees is a near and present example. This sort of unity is not necessarily at risk of honesty about differences being embraced and explored.

3) Even minimalist common ground can still quake.

The ambitions of ecumenism are described in this chapter. The

“organic unity” of sweeping reunion across the board, particularly in terms of shared modality is one of them (p120). The other form of ambition is “reconciled diversity” (p122) in which certain expressions of unity cohere to a minimalist fundamental common ground, and all other things are held separate.

I am pondering how these apply to the Anglican concerns. Ostensibly the Church of England is an “organic unity”, yet beyond the structural necessities, doesn’t appear to be behaving so. But I am an Anglican from further afield, ordained in the Anglican Church of Australia. There Anglicanism is a federalised arrangement of dioceses in which even General Synod canons can be ignored in each local place. The wider perspective is that of independent national provinces.

It is a clearer perspective of a diversity with minimalist common ground. That ground is, in history, that of the so-called Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral. These are the four (only four!) things that are fundamentally necessary to being Anglican. They arose during colonial times, and have more recently been wrestled with by fresh expressions and church plants working out their ecclesial identity. They are, to quote:

- 1. the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the rule and ultimate standard of faith.*
 - 2. the Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith*
 - 3. the two sacraments ordained by Christ himself: baptism and the Lord’s Supper*
 - 4. the historic episcopate, locally adapted.*
- (p127)

It’s tight enough to define something real, but it’s still very loose. It is as minimal a base of fellowship as

ecumenical movements such as the WCC. It should be robust. As the story goes, when someone episcopal was once asked about the Anglican “split”, the response was “how do you split blancmange?” Anglicanism, historically, has not been *brittle*.

Yet now, even the Quadrilateral, raises the problematic questions. Number 3) is pretty safe. Number 4) has been changed in its character through the provision of alternative oversight and mutually exclusive network of episcopal “recognitions.” Number 2) is far from guaranteed. And Number 1) is the crux of the issue: differing epistemologies no longer able to cushion themselves from each other by ambiguities.

Is the Anglican common ground shifting? We need to be honest about that.

Next: Part 8, Good Disagreement Between Religions by Toby Howarth

Unity, Diversity, and Conflict

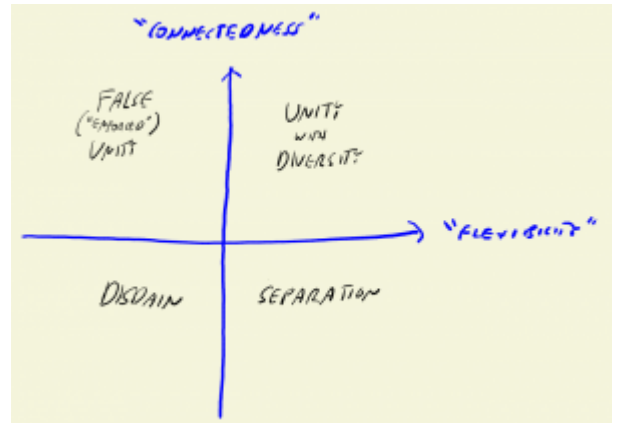
I’ve adapted this from a talk I gave a number of years ago in my church-planting days. These were the heady days of the “mixed economy church” and, as a young gung-ho missional fresh-expressioner, I was asked to talk about how the church can draw together both the traditional and the contemporary.

At the time, there was a degree of conflict between the “old” and the “new.”

I’m thinking about it now because of my current reading about the current issues of conflict. The current issues are

epistemological and ethical, rather than missional, but there is still a correlation.

The framework loosely draws on the concepts of *flexibility* and *connectedness*. There are some marriage preparation courses that use these words to look at family of origin issues and modes of how people live together. I'm using them in a modified sense (and perhaps inaccurately) and applying them to ecclesial "family."



The ideal of course is in the upper-right quadrant. Unity is expressed not only institutionally but in true fellowship, and there is a diversity of expression in non-essentials that reveal the gospel in a fulsome and applicable way.

In the bottom-right quadrant we have low connectedness. There is a great deal of flexibility and freedom, and a full range of opinions exists, including much that reveals the gospel.

Often these things are manifest independently and inefficiently. This is chaotic, but it can be creative, as we shall see.

In the bottom-left quadrant we have the worst of both worlds.

There is low flexibility, but also low connectedness. The things that bind are more bureaucratic than anything else. At the same time differences are not well tolerated. This is a toxic situation marked by disdain.

The top-left quadrant has high connectedness, but low flexibility. This is not unity so much as *uniformity* and people are held together by some form of rigidity. This form of unity has a sense of compulsion, or at least obligation, and is therefore a false or "enforced" unity.

Conflict often lies in this top-left quadrant. Why? If there

were less connectedness then the parties wouldn't care about each other enough, or interact with each other enough, for the conflict to foment. If there were more flexibility then differences could be accommodated.

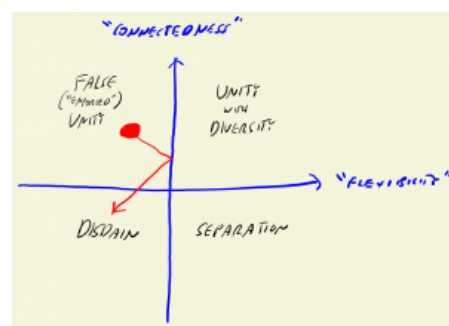
This is a possible way of looking at the current situation, which is manifest on matters of sexual ethics but actually runs deeper to fundamental matters of worldview. Anglicanism is still *connected* – at the very least (and it is much more than this) by an episcopacy, a shared geography, by history, and by formularies and legal standing. It is very clearly a broad church with a great deal of diversity of expression.

But there is a point of inflexibility: an articulated, inherited, and (many would argue) *necessary* restriction on matters of doctrine and practice.

The rub of it is this. Conflict makes us insecure about unity. We therefore try and get to the happy quadrant of “unity and diversity” by emphasising what holds us together.

But at this point unity and inflexibility are interlinked. We end up with paradoxical behaviour – we try and allow flexibility by inflexible means.

In my original context of missional expression this looked like diversity-by-management and showed the problem of “high control, low accountability” which brings new expressions to a painful and grinding halt. The attempt to get from the left-top quadrant *directly* to the



right-top quadrant is therefore fraught. It's a “hard wall” transition, and the likely result is a rebound to a worse situation in which both diversity and unity are diminished.

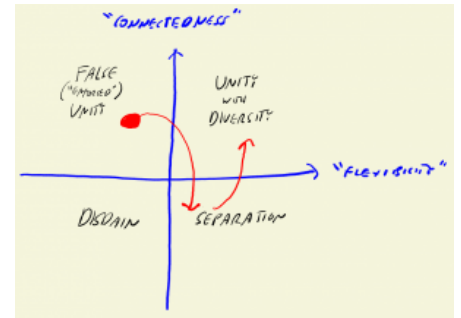
Rather, the road to “unity in diversity” is achieved more effectively by *loosening* the connectedness, and offering freedom, even a degree of separation. This allows room for the diversity to manifest itself. In the missional context,

it gives space for a new expression to “find itself” in God, to work out its vision and communal life, and so be blessed.

Moreover, as the diversity grows, free of connectedness, there can be a *discovery* of things held in common.

Upon this common ground a unity can be explored and expressed, resulting in a life-giving “unity in diversity.”

Connectedness increases without reducing flexibility, and the result is good.



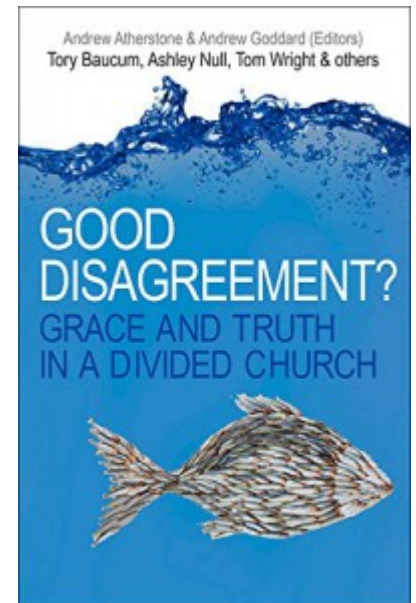
In sum, the “conflict” is resolved by letting go, offering freedom, and then seeking to restore unity from a place of possible separation.

In the current troubles, I wonder if this is the shape of a way forward. Rather than grasping at unity, allow freedom, recognising that that freedom may include at least some element of *separation*. From that place of honesty and freedom, the common ground can then be re-explored, and expressed in a mutually appreciated way.

Review: Good Disagreement?

Pt. 6, Good Disagreement and the Reformation

I am continuing with my chapter-by-chapter, essay-by-essay review of *Good Disagreement?* Previously:



- Part 1: Foreword by Justin Welby
- Part 2: Disagreeing with Grace by Andrew Atherstone and Andrew Goddard
- Part 3: Reconciliation in the New Testament by Ian Paul
- Part 4: Division and Discipline in the New Testament Church by Michael B. Thompson
- Part 5: Pastoral Theology for Perplexing Topics: Paul and Adiaphora by Tom Wright

Ashley Null. Big fan. He is an absolute authority on Reformation History. I heard him speak on Cranmer at the Anglican Future's Conference in Melbourne earlier this year.

He is a true exegete of history: he connects you with the essence of history, not merely its facts and propositions. In his contribution here Null brings the accounts of divisions amongst the early Reformers, particularly controversies about the nature of the eucharistic elements, as background information for what good disagreement might look like.

His basic point is this:

The Reformation should not be written off as an era of only "bad disagreements"... the confessional identities which still divide Western Christianity today are, in fact, the enduring result of that era's successful attempts at "good

disagreement", if only within specific streams. (p85)

Even if not fully achieved, *unity* and *agreement* were sought after. Disagreements were, by and large, carefully and constructively managed; it was only on matters which, in good conscience, could not be held indifferently, that separate identities were embraced.

If there is an ongoing question that this book forces upon the current troubles it is this: "What sort of disagreement is this?" Is it overcomable difference of opinion, or is it fundamental matters of foundation? Take a look at the following facebook discussion stemming from an Ian Paul post to see the complexity of this in the real world, beginning with a reasonable conclusion that the differences are not (to coin a phrase) indifferent:

How then does Ashley Null's essay help us? I'm not sure that it does much more than give us some historical analogies. Although perhaps these can serve as some object lessons for us.

Null's exposition of the eucharistic controversies get us somewhere towards that. Here he speaks of the Northern and Southern reformers – Luther, Melancthon, Bucer, Zwingli and the like – and the genuine desire to "call one another "brother" and to engage in intercommunion" (p90). There is good conflict resolution, an agreement on what they disagreed on, and on the relative importance of those disagreements, articulation of the common ground, honesty about the differences, exploration of language that would hold acceptable ambiguity and so on. It's a genius that the Anglican tradition was later to elevate to an ideal! But despite this "good disagreement" in the end there was actually *disagreement* and separation.

To correlate to the contemporary debates, we can use this

legacy to note that there has actually been a great deal of *good* disagreement already – balanced resolutions, indabas, reports, and now shared conversations and (very) delayed decisions. History affirms us.

But the correlation also fails: Luther et al. began from existing disunity (excepting a vague sense of embryonic protestantism) and were attempting to find unity. In the current situation we have an ostensible unity around presumed essentials, which some wish to modify. On the face of it, the only positive (non status-quo) decision that can be made is to move away from the essentials, and therefore weaken the unity (“live and let live”) or fracture it according to conscience (“let us walk apart”). Courtesy and gentleness must still abound, but it’s a very different dynamic.

In that regard I found Null’s contribution a little irrelevant, with conclusions that are basically motherhood statements: “scandal for the church to be divided,” “theological truth mattered”, “not all theological issues were of equal importance.” (p106).

The most assertive thing he does is remind us of the base authority of the Bible. Cranmer saw the Bible both as the “sole basis of unity in the essentials of faith and morals” (p107) and also as the basis for “wide parameters for the development of institutional life.” (p107). Scripture as the basis for both unity AND diversity. But if Ian Paul’s facebook post tells us anything, it’s that it’s our understanding of Scripture, and therefore our understanding of unity and diversity itself, that is on the table! Without that common ground even history will struggle to help.

Next: Part 7, Ecumenical (Dis)agreements by Andrew Atherstone and Martin Davie