

# The Future of Tolerance, Belligerence, and Good Disagreement.



In the light of reading *Good Disagreement?* I found Maajid Nawaz' *Big Think* video on dialogue and the Future of Tolerance of interest.

I don't know much about Nawaz but he appears to be a centrist at the hinge point of moderate Islam. He recounts a constructive dialogue with atheist Sam Harris. They continue to disagree but have disagreed well. The video is well worth a watch (embedded at the end of this post) but his main points towards good disagreement are:

## Adversarial Collaboration

*An agreement between opposing parties about how they'll work together or gain a better understanding of their differences.*

## Emotional Process

*"Re-humanizing" your adversary, even though you disagree with his or her perspective. Try to see the other person holistically, as someone with valid human experience.*

## Intellectual Process

*First, identify common ground. Isolate specific points of agreement.*

*Practice intellectual empathy. Acknowledge when the internal logic pattern of a n argument makes sense, even though you may disagree with the premise.*

*Recognize your own moral compass and maintain your courage.*

These points are well made. *Good Disagreement?* arrives at many of them, grounded on a Christian worldview. I would love to see Nawaz' philosophical underpinnings. Emotional and intellectual honesty, personal generosity, with the courage to maintain your convictions... these appear to be the ingredients for constructive tolerance. I applaud his stance.

It doesn't mean it's easy. There are two significant difficulties:

a) Nawaz and Harris can exercise these qualities because of their existing separation. What I mean is that, apart from the vague obligations of living on the same planet and in the same society, they have no need to interact or collaborate. They can approach their interaction from a relative position of great freedom, and part ways at relatively little cost.

Disagreements that are "in-house" are more fraught. When the institutional, historical, or even theological, ties are strong, that freedom of separation is reduced and good disagreement is hampered.

In that circumstance another component is needed: a form of "giving each other space." The Church of England is still working out what this means internally; the Shared Conversations are the current attempt as I understand it. In the wider Anglican Communion troubles of the last decade or two the gift of space was attempted through instruments such as indaba and moratoria (on same-sex blessings and ordinations, and episcopal incursions) and these simply proved to be not enough.

The creation of ACNA and the GAFCON movement has codified a separation and encouraged its members (crf. Nawaz' last point.) This movement is in many ways unfortunate (who wanted to have these disputes anyway?) but has been quite *necessary*, not least for the purposes of good disagreement. My hope is that this invigorated confessional identity, which clearly demarcates a philosophical and increasingly institutional separation, will not only catalyse clarity in the disagreement but also generous interaction. My hope that this will occur at the forthcoming meeting of Primates, from both sides. But that brings up the second point:

b) It takes two to tango. Nawaz recounts a constructive interaction with a similar motivated interlocutor. This isn't always the case. In my experience the most machiavellian groups are self-styled as tolerant and progressive. There's a belligerent political strategy: seek dramatic change using absolutist rhetoric, and in the face of consequent dramatic resistance, complain about the hard-hearted impositional schismatic "refuses to dialogue" bigotry of the other party.

Of course belligerence begets belligerence in a vicious circle intertwining both sides of a debate. But the burden is uneven. When there are proposals for fundamental and irreversible change on the table, the risk of good disagreement is higher for those who oppose the change. In a place of belligerent stalemate, the risk of stepping back to good disagreement for the proponents of change is, at worst, a "non-decision" of the status quo. The risk to the opponents is that the irreversible change occurs. This is why decrying bad disagreement works unevenly, and why it can be used politically to take resistance to change out of the game; you'll hurt yourself, but you'll hurt your opponent more.

All in all, unless both parties turn away from belligerence *at the same time*, good disagreement simply isn't. Nawaz talks about his good disagreement as a delicate exercise. A similar delicacy is needed in the context of Anglican good

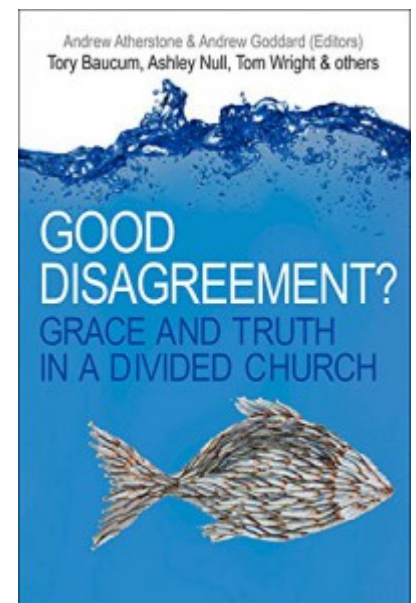
disagreement. It is why I admire those who are seeking to bring it about.

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# 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
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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**eading 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,

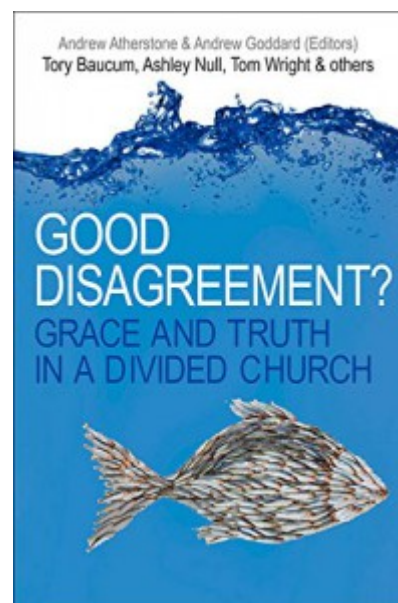
and called us to follow him. He doesn't *pick* sides, he *defines* the side.

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.

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

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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

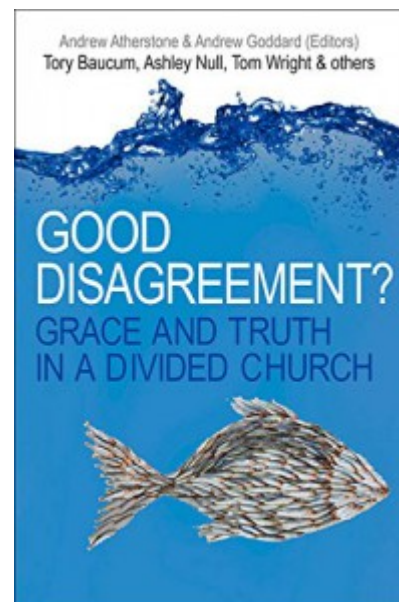
possible to speak across the centre. It is something that is essential to good disagreement. But it's not simple, it does require trust on both sides, and with it being dependent on others, it runs the risk of failing. There are pitfalls, likely mistakes, and the risk of misinterpretation. The outcome 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

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

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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.

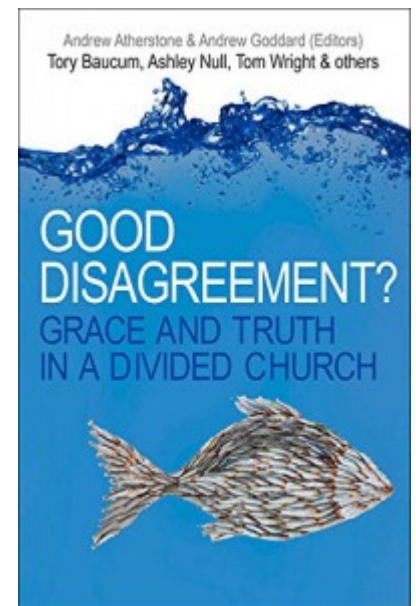
**In conclusion**, there are some valuable insights in this chapter. It challenged me at a number of points to examine my feelings and motivations, as well as my thoughts about such things as establishment and the role of the state in religious affairs. But in the end, there was frustration. I'm all 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.

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

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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.

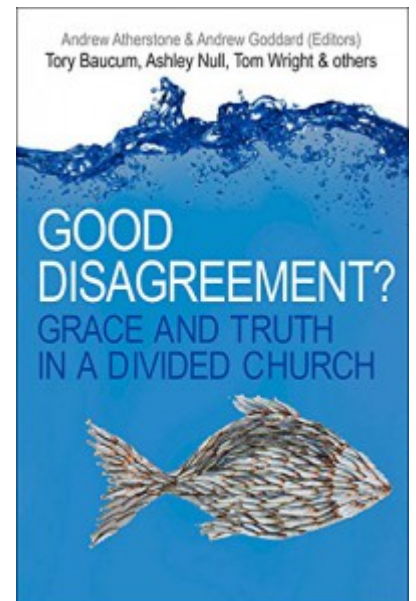
Is the Anglican common ground shifting? We need to be honest about that.

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

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## 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

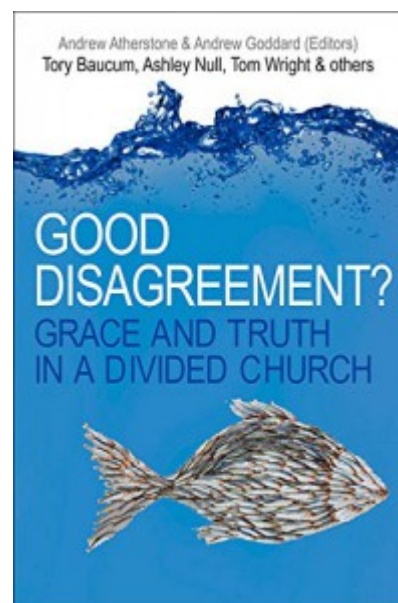
authority of the Bible. Cranmer saw the Bible both as the “sole basis of unity in the essentials of faith and morals” (p107) and also as the basis for “wide parameters for the development of institutional life.” (p107). Scripture as the basis for both unity AND diversity. But if Ian Paul’s facebook post 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

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## **Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 5, Pastoral Theology for Perplexing Topics: Paul and Adiaphora**

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

N. T. Wright. Big fan. I've been exploring the depths of his perspective for some time now. In this contribution to *Good Disagreement?* he not only delivers his insights into the broader framework for conflict, he actually applies it to the issues at hand. Are sexual ethics a matter for indifference in the church? Wright's answer is a resounding "no".

Wright identifies a "double stress" in the current problems: an apparent tension between "unity" and "holiness." For Wright this is only an appearance because "properly understood, they do not form a paradox, pulling in opposite directions... they actually reinforce one another." (p67). I suspect those who would differ from him on sexual ethics would also resolve the tension; but for a different understanding of 'holiness.' The tension exists when there is need to agree to disagree.

For matters of *adiaphora*, (so-called "things indifferent"), this tension is resolvable in charity – *significant* charity! Speaking of Paul's appeal at the end of Romans, Wright offers:

*He does not here ask the different groups to give up their practices; merely not to judge one another where differences exist. As Paul well knew (though we sometimes forget), this is actually just as large a step, if not larger, than a change in practice itself. ...That is, of course, why the apparently innocuous "live and let live" proposals for reform are the real crunch, as most reforming groups know well. (pp76-77)*

I love this summation of how the tensions of adiaphora are to be handled: **“Messiah-people will make demands on one another’s charity; they must not make demands on one another’s conscience.”** (p77). And similarly:

*...the subtle rule of adiaphora is about as different from a modern doctrine of “tolerance” as can be imagined. “Tolerance” is not simply a low-grade version of “love”; in some senses, it is its opposite, as “tolerance” can imply a distancing, a wave from the other side of the street, rather than the rich embrace of “the sibling for whom the Messiah died. (p81)*

I think I was saying something similar earlier about the danger of mere “conversation” being the stuff of theological strangers.

For issues that are not indifferent, the “live and let live” tension is simply not tenable. They are matters which define and undergird the unity, rather than those which are worked out in the charity of unity. On such matters the difference is not simply a tension, it is a chasm.

To discern, therefore, the scope of what is *adiaphora* we must come to where Wright begins, to his understanding of Paul’s “vision for the church.” Here we have straight-down-the-line New Perspectives ecclesiology. In fact, for those getting into the New Perspectives, this chapter is not a bad introduction. The detail does not need rehearsing here and he is explicit about his conclusions:

Certain things are indifferent because...

*The divine intervention, as Paul saw it, unveiled in the messianic events concerning Jesus, was to create a single worldwide family; and therefore any practices that functioned as symbols dividing different ethnic groups could not be maintained as absolutes within this single family. (p70)*

Certain things are not indifferent because...

*This divine intervention... was that this single family would... embody, represent, and carry forward the plan of "new creation", the plan which had been the intention for Israel from the beginning; and that therefore any practices that belonged to the dehumanizing, anti-creation world of sin and death could likewise not be maintained within this new-creation family. (p70)*

And this is where Wright picks his side.

Now, others would use these categories on their side. For some, I'm sure, the church's traditional view of homosexuality is "dehumanizing" and therefore the correction of that through the blessing of same-sex relationships etc. is a matter of necessity, and is not adiaphora. Despite the protestations of some (I think particularly of Loveday Alexander's declared intentions that I heard recently) it is clear that the current disagreements are much more than letting some getting on with what they want to do; it's each side seeing the gospel denied in the other. I cannot see how, if "live and let live" is the outcome of the shared conversations, we will have done much more than prove the insipidity of the identity we have left in common.

Wright's basis for his position enters right into that ecclesial identity, and the call on the church to embody both new covenant and new creation:

*In terms of creation and new creation, the new creation retrieves and fulfils the intention for the original creation, in which the coming together of heaven and earth is reflected in the coming together of male and female. This vision of the original creative purpose was retained by Israel, the covenant people, the "bride" of YHWH, and the strong sexual ethic which resulted formed a noticeable mark of distinction between the Jewish people and the wider world.*



(p71)

*Paul insists that the markers which distinguish Jew from Gentile are no longer relevant in the new, messianic dispensation; but the Jewish-style worship of the One God, and the human male/female life which reflects that creational monotheism, is radically reinforced. (p72)*

The line he draws around the *adiaphora* clearly rebuts the tired argument by which critics of the church's position play the "why aren't you obeying the whole law?" card.

*The differentiation he introduces has nothing to do with deciding that some parts of the Torah are good and to be retained (sexual ethics) and other parts are bad and to be abolished (food laws, circumcision and so on). That is not the point... Some parts of Torah – the parts which kept Israel separate from the Gentile world until the coming of the Messiah – have done their work and are now put to one side, not because they were bad but because they were good and have done their work. Other parts of Torah – the parts which pointed to the divine intention to renew the whole creation through Israel – are celebrated as being now at last within reach through Jesus and the Spirit. The old has passed away; all things have become new – and the "new" includes the triumphant and celebratory recovery of the original created intention, not least for male and female in marriage. (p74)*

There can be no good disagreement if the scope of *adiaphora* cannot be agreed to. It is the very playing field upon which the charitable and constructive tussle of church life can occur. Wright has provided, here, a thorough and thoughtful determination of the shape of that playing field; but the very same things have also determined which side he is playing on. Those who "play on the other side" must also justify a field of play that is coherent with their position. The danger of course is that the conversation is

then cross-purposed: to extend the metaphor to breaking point, one side turns up to play football on a football field, and the other turns up with rugby kit across town; by what rules do the two engage?

Or, with more precision, the ongoing problem is outlined by these concluded remarks from Wright. It's a problem to which he offers no solution:

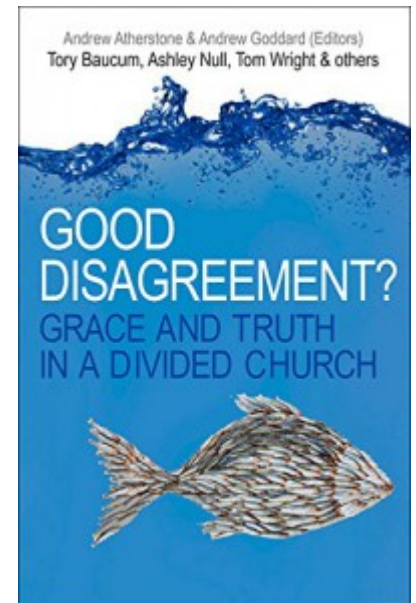
*We of course, live in a world where, in the aftermath of the Enlightenment's watering down of Reformation theology, many have reduced the faith to a set of abstract doctrines and a list of detached and apparently arbitrary rules, which "conservatives" then insist upon and "radicals" try to bend or merely ignore. It is this framework itself which we have got wrong, resulting in dialogues of the deaf, or worse, the lobbing of angry verbal hand grenades over walls of incomprehension. (p82)*

Next: Part 6: Good Disagreement and the Reformation by Ashley Null

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## **Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 4, Division and Discipline in the New Testament Church**

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

It is simply a matter of honest observation that there is currently division in the church. If there wasn't then there would be no need for shared conversations and the like. The question (I hesitate to call it an "open question" as there are clearly many for whom it is answered and closed) is as to the *sort* of division it is. It's a question that creates a predicament: in answering it we don't find the way forward before we find out the harder reality of who we are, right now, in the present.

Michael Thompson, vice-principal of Ridley Hall, Cambridge, makes his contribution to *Good Disagreement?* by surveying the sorts of divisions that are described in the New Testament, and the disciplinary responses that they engender. It is a good and helpful analysis which raises the right thoughts and espouses the correct attitudes. But Thompson doesn't, as I'm discovering is the way of this book, take us as far as applying these things to the current perturbations.

In simplistic terms, there are two sorts of

division: *inevitable* and *schismatic* (to use my own terms). Thompson picks up on the same point as Ian Paul that sometimes the “the gospel brings division” (p43):

*...there is no indication that Jesus sought deliberately to divide his hearers; it was the inevitable result of a message which some joyfully accepted but others rejected or simply did not understand. (p44)*

This gospel-based division, if you like, falls within the semantic range of the original word, *schism*. But we have come to use the term *schismatic* in a narrower sense, in which the unity of the church is attacked or damaged by things such as false teaching and the failure to discipline immorality.

The point of application that is left for us is to consider whether the current division(s) are of one sort or the other. Neither option is particularly pleasant.

It may be that we are simply encountering the **inevitable division** that comes from the preaching of the gospel: the gospel as it is conceived by one side, is neither received nor understood by the other. It is tempting to draw this conclusion; the depths of difference appear to run very deep, and are not simply isolated to one point of doctrine, but extend across the core of the worldviews in question.

If this is indeed what we are facing then the way forward is clear: good disagreement is not about discipline, but about persuasion, evangelism, and proclamation. Indeed, we might say, that it is about “shared conversation.” This is because this is not the division of brothers and sisters, it is the division that exists when one group has not and refuses to “buy in” to the other. Good conversation is what theological *strangers* do.

So perhaps the other option applies: we are actually dealing with **schismatic division**. This is also a tempting conclusion

to draw. Either side can readily think of the other as effectively heretical: that they are preaching a gospel that is, even if they are too polite to say it, from their perspective, false. Thompson's survey thoroughly shows how schismatic division in the New Testament coheres with false teaching and false teachers, fellow Christians who deny the gospel.

On this point I initially thought that Thompson had shown his colours, at least implicitly, as he applies Pauline rebuke to "...those who *innovate* at the expense of church unity, with a claim of being "prophetic", and to those who lead others away from the church in response to such innovations." (p46, emphasis mine). But then I realised that even the progressive sides of this debate are seeking to claim historical ground, and accuse the traditionalists of the innovation. Consider the recent interview with Ian Paul and Jeremy Pemberton ([link](#)) which, beyond the immediate considerations of an employment tribunal, has the progressive interlocutor appealing to one of the Thirty-Nine Articles. Thompson's consideration applies symmetrically.

If the response to the inevitable division of the gospel is *persuasion*; then the response to schismatic division is *discipline*. Thompson's consideration of church discipline is the most helpful part of his contribution. Discipline is deliberate, and it can result in separation and exclusion; but it's heart and motivation is restoration and re-unification.

It's what you do when you have "bought into" the welfare of the other. It's a *family* mode of operation that appeals at beginning, middle, and end to the head of the family, which is Christ. Thompson's conclusion sums it up:

*Biblical discipline is not punitive, but excludes in order to protect and aims to restore. The practice of gracious and effective discipline of this kind, in the spirit in which Jesus called for it, is not often seen in the church today. The risk of acting in anger rather than with love is great.*

*Equally dangerous, however, is to allow spiritual cancer to spread instead of confronting a threat to the entire community. (p60)*

Thompson's essay is the first in this book to make me seriously cogitate on the fundamental wisdom of the shared conversations process. Does conversation, rather than discipline, connote that we are already such strangers to one another that we must interact as such? Is this logic our reality? :- **The deeper the division, the more the road ahead looks like conversation and not discipline. But the more it looks like conversation, the less we are actually invested in each other.**

Mind you, it has also made me cogitate about some of the alternative approaches. The conservative GAFCON Primates, for instance, want "repentance and discipline" on the table at the forthcoming meeting in January 2016. Are they, by this, acknowledging fraternity, albeit a wounded one which requires addressing? Similarly the litigious and disciplinary actions of TEC against churches and dioceses that are now part of ACNA presuppose by the attempt at accountability, a fraternity. Consider how Thompson offers wisdom for determining the basis of interaction:

*It is of course true that "by their fruits you shall know them"; the difficulty is when to measure the fruits." (p52)... Within the church this means treating people with the "charitable assumption" that their profession to belong to Christ is true and encouraging them to live by it. (p52-53)*

I find it hard to see "charitable assumption" being exercised on either side, yet the discipline they want presupposes a mutual belonging. Perhaps if the Primate's Meeting is simply a conversation then we will finally be sure of who we are to each other.

There is much more that can be gleaned from Thompson's considerations. His calling us to humility of Christ, and warning of "uninformed Christian zeal" (p47) is something that I should have emphasised more. Similarly his unpacking of judgement ultimately ends in a deference to the judgement of Christ and it is worthy of a fuller exploration, by Thompson himself and by his readers. Consider the constructive possibilities that could stem from this observation:

*The seven churches in Revelation 2-3 are rebuked for serious error and called to repentance, but are not told to dissociate from each other, and Christians are not instructed to separate from them. Rather it is Jesus Christ who will discipline... (p61)*

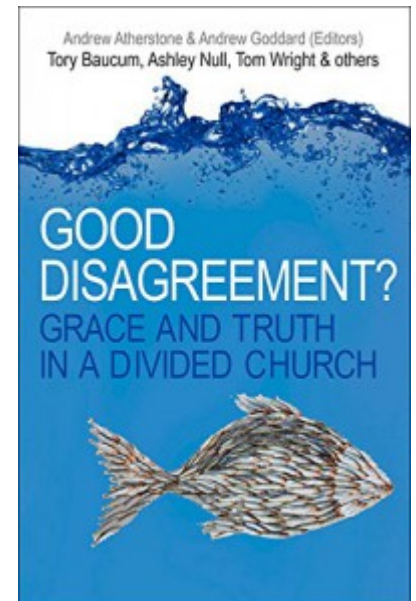
It is insightful that he concludes with Romans 12: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."

Next: Part 5: Pastoral Theology for Perplexing Topics: Paul and Adiaphora by Tom Wright

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## **Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 3, Reconciliation in the New Testament**

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

My respect for Ian Paul as a reasonable and reasoned voice in contemporary debates has only grown since I've been in the UK.

I heard him speak at a recent introduction to the Shared Conversations in Oxford and was impressed by both the substance and demeanour of his presentation.

Paul's contribution to *Good Disagreement?* is a chapter on reconciliation. It is a short and simple analysis, beginning with a lexical summary of the word "reconciliation" and teasing out some principles from the Pauline epistles and the Gospels. He helpfully summarises himself on page 38. Here is a summary of the summary:

- 1) Reconciliation is primarily the work of God and is primarily between God and humanity...*
- 2) The language of reconciliation and peacemaking is arguably of central importance in both Paul and the Gospels...*
- 3) Reconciliation between humanity and God then flows out into reconciliation among humanity...*
- 4) It is therefore not possible to separate reconciliation among people from their reconciliation to God; the first*



*flows from the second...*

*5) Paradoxically, because the reconciled unity of humanity is always connected with God and his purposes, God's offer of peace can actually be a cause of division...*

It's a helpful analysis. The most helpful emphasis for me was on the centrality of God's agency.

Disagreements and conflicts can be confusing, chaotic affairs.

They often involve a mix of negative emotions as well as reasoned arguments. Injustices can occur on both sides.

Differences become entrenched and assumed. Wise peacemakers can do much; they can de-escalate tensions, they can clarify differences, they can ensure polite and reasonable modes of engagement. But true reconciliation, true restoration of unity, rests on the work of the Holy Spirit changing hearts and building his people. **Reconciliation is not simply a godly idea (although it is that), and it not simply a mode of obedience (although it is that), it is first and foremost divine action.**

This thought gives us a fundamental mode for good disagreement: **seek God**. It is only by his power that we will be reconciled to meaningful unity. It's a thought that might also highlight a danger with the current shared conversations: that the focus might come off of God, and onto ourselves and one another. The danger of meeting together without common focus is that all we do is simply meet one another's brokenness and hard-hearts. The task is not simply to come together for it's own sake; the task is that, together, we seek out God.

*Because reconciliation is something that God effects (rather than being simply a desirable state of affairs) and because reconciliation between people cannot be separated from reconciliation to God, then the will of God has to be central to the task of reconciliation between parties who are in*

*conflict. (p39)*

The concern then, of course, is that we may have different ways of seeking God, perhaps even mutually exclusive ways. If that's the case (and it is certainly the observation of some<sup>1</sup>) then at least the disagreement has been brought to its fundamental question. As one of the reflective questions at the end of this chapter states, "to what extent can we be reconciled with others without a common understanding of the gospel?" (p41).

It's a telling question which raises another of Ian Paul's emphases about the reconciling work of God: that it sometimes results in **division** "between those who accept God's agenda of reconciliation, and those who reject it, either in relation to its terms or in relation to its goal" (p38). The parable of the prodigal son is used to illustrate this point on page 36, and we could ask the question: what do you do when each side, on the other's terms, are in "older brother" mode, rejecting the grace (as it is conceived) of God? It is hard to reconcile. It seems impossible that the older and younger brother are able to seek the Father together. It would take a miracle. It needs divine intervention, and that is the point.

But there is one final corollary of the primacy of God's action in reconciliation and that is this: **assurance**. Even if the disagreements, at their depths, end up with no common way of seeking out God, we are not unfamiliar with it. We experience it every time we bear witness to Christ to our neighbours, when we speak of the message of reconciliation that has been committed to us (2 Cor 5:19). We cannot change the heart. We cannot ensure that our persuasion (2 Cor 5:11) is effective. Indeed, we may be considered to be out of our mind (2 Cor 5:13): "I don't need to be reconciled to God, there's nothing wrong with me, why on earth would you think otherwise?" Yet we do it. And we do it because we trust that God indeed has the power to reach hearts, convict of sin, and

bring solace, comfort, and a peace that passes all understanding.

And so the current disagreements may frustrate us, drain us, stumble us and even cripple us. But in some sense, they should not worry us. God is bigger than this. And so we enter into even intractable disagreements confident not in ourselves, but in the God who reconciles.

Next: Part 4, Division and Discipline in the New Testament Church by Michael Thompson

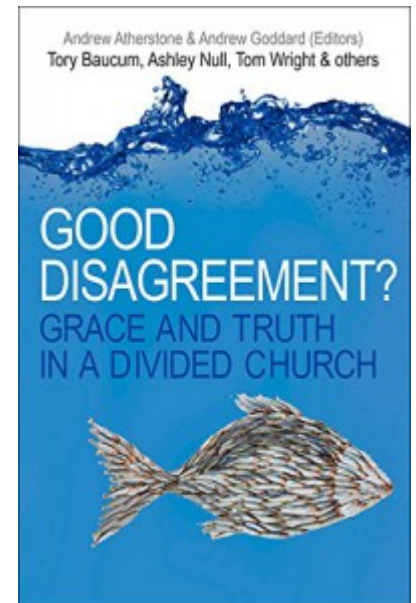
Footnotes:

1) I am reminded of the words of Greg Venables, then Primate of the Southern Cone, who remarked after the 2009 Primate's Meeting: "We were all agreed. There are two very different understandings of the Christian Faith now living together, indeed at war with one another in the Anglican Communion and the situation has no long term resolution. It would take a miracle to keep it together and Dr. Rowan Williams understands that. He will try and keep it together for as long as he can under his watch." (source)

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## **Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 2, Disagreeing with Grace**

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



- Part 1: Foreword by Justin Welby

In this first chapter the book's editors, Andrew Atherstone and Andrew Goddard, outline something of the programme. They look to the Scriptures at the (many) times disagreement occurred amongst God's people. They raise the question of what "good disagreement" might look like and, indeed, whether it is actually possible.

Atherstone's and Goddard's contribution is substantial necessary work, but contains nothing that is stunningly insightful. As with many theological "problems" two aspects are presented in tension:

**The first** is the importance of defending the truth:

*...gospel truth matters and is a blessing to the world, so should be defended against errors that obscure the gospel and can be seriously detrimental for people's spiritual health.*

*Error is dangerous and needs to be strenuously resisted and named for what it is – a powerful force that opposes the God of truth and threatens to damage the life and mission of the church. (p5)*

There is no doubt about this. Indeed there are times when

Scripture literally anathematizes falsehood. Unity and agreement is not for its own sake; the people of Babel were united! So-called “mis-unity” is just as deleterious to the gospel as disunity.

**The second** aspect is the importance of relationship. Referring to Paul:

*He is clear that there are ways of disagreeing and patterns of conflict which, although they rise among believers, have no place in the Christian community. (p6)*

It's been an adage of mine to aspire to being not only correct (propositionally) but right (relationally). All of us who have passed through the zeal of theological formation know the mishaps of sometimes being correct but also terribly wrong.

Nevertheless, a truths-in-tension framework here is fraught; because the two sides are not independent. In reality, you can't balance “defending the truth” with “relating well” because if you don't relate well you can't defend the truth, and if you won't defend the truth you can't relate well. They are subtractively connected (the absence of one reduces the other), not additively combined (the presence of one augments the other towards something new).

Which is why, on the things that matter, as Atherstone and Goddard point out, “agreeing to disagree” is not the answer.

At the end of that path both the defence of truth and the depth of relationship are reduced to nothing. **The foundations of “Good Disagreement” are therefore not relational but epistemological.** It must ask and answer, “What are the things that matter?” With the answer to that question both the defence of the truth and right-relationship can be built, without answering that question neither can find grounding.

*The crucial task is to identify those foundational truths. If all views are embraced within the church, then it has*

*ceased to take seriously its calling to be a witness to truth and righteousness and to have a distinct identity as the body of Christ in the world. (p9)*

This epistemological necessity is woven throughout Atherstone and Goddard's treatise, but usually only implicitly. "Controversy and disagreement in the church is not simply a curse" they say on page 13, and "It can be a blessing in disguise because it forces us to go back to the Bible with renewed diligence and prayer, to clarify the issues at stake." Which is to say, disagreement becomes an epistemological exercise, a return to Scripture.

Similarly, they critique the *ad clerum* of October 2014 in the Diocese of Oxford. The statement from Oxford aspires to believe that those with differing views "are bearing witness to different aspects of the truth that lies in Christ alone," and asserts that "not only is all truth God's truth, but God's truth is ultimately bound to be beyond our grasp because our minds are but miniscule receptors before the great and beautiful Mystery of God." This is clearly an epistemological statement and Atherstone and Goddard appear to have issue with it:

*It argues that we should "respect" and "honour" not only the other person but also their views. This fails to make a key distinction – that not every view held by a Christian is necessarily a legitimate Christian view: some of our opinions may be sub-Christian, or even anti-Christian, and in need of correction. Furthermore the statement presumes that all these views bear witness in some sense to the truth found in Christ, without any reference to their content. (p18)*

This chapter scopes what "good disagreement" might look like. Atherstone and Goddard, like good facilitators, leave the question open. But it seems to me that the trajectory of their discourse is this: that the question is not "what is the

truth?" but "what is actually core and common to us?" and the manner is gracious, freedom-offering relationship.

There are two observations I would make:

**Firstly**, the other question inevitably involves relational wounds, irrespective of the gentleness of the parties. On the issue of sexual ethics, for instance, we could ask "what is the Christian view on sexual identity and activity?" Ask this question and the held-truths of one side inevitably hurt the other. From either side, no matter how well it is phrased, or how gently it is expressed, the *actual position* of the other side is "you do not adequately know or appreciate the love of God, you have embraced a cognitive dissonance by which you justify a refusal to submit to His life-giving ways in Christ." I haven't picked sides here – this is what *either side* inevitably hears from the other.

If an attempt to answer that question is what is meant by *good disagreement* then what we are being asked to embrace is ongoing mutual wounding, an ecclesial life of pain. That is not necessarily a bad thing – after all it wasn't just Westley-the-farm-boy who noted that "Life is pain" and life does not flourish in avoiding it, as the way of Christ does surely show us.

Nevertheless, the church is called not only to the birth pains, but to the new life of the covenant, in which the fractures of human brokenness are identified and resolved, not incarnated. And so the more basic question is required, i.e. "is our belief and practice on sexual identity and activity something that must be core and common to us?" It's a less wounding question, but one that presupposes an existing, and entrenched, separation.

**Secondly**, it is telling that in many of Atherstone's and Goddard's examples of "agreeing to disagree" – I'm thinking particularly of their reference to Wesley and "in essentials

unity, on doubtful matters freedom, in all things love" (p10) – the application of that good disagreement is not to *koinonia* (within the fellowship) but *ecumenism* (with others of a different fellowship).

It struck me that this is an implied admission that we are already talking as if this is a problem between churches (plural) rather than within the Church. It struck me particularly as my observation of the Church of England slowly grows. There is a sense in which the Church already operates as different churches. For instance, in Australia, there are annual Diocesan Synods in which there is a clear ongoing expression (for better or worse) of all clergy and many laity gathered around their Bishop. There is less of that in England. Collegiality is expressed more through ecclesial societies and relational networks. Episcopal leadership appears to operate in a slightly different mode – more of a "I'll help you be who God is calling you to be" rather than "come with me, where God is leading us." This is observation, not value judgement!

But the point is, unlike in Australia, I can see room to conceive of the Church of England as two or three geographically intermingled ecclesial communities, that are, outside of administrative, historical, and legal realities, effectively separate in relational and theological terms.

I could be wrong. In fact, I'm likely to be! These are initial observations only and still very much from an "outsider's" perspective. But if this is the case, then honesty about this is necessary for any good disagreement.

After all, the goal of unity in diversity can only find it's equilibrium when the diversity is given its fullest freedom, including the freedom to change name and walk apart. Whatever the outcome of the current disagreements, which I have every hope will be done well, it must be gracious honesty and reality that ground the way forward, not well-meaning pretence.



Next: Part 3: Reconciliation in the New Testament by Ian Paul