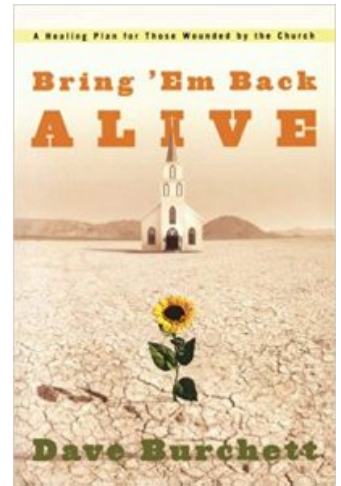


Review: Bring 'Em Back Alive – A Healing Plan for Those Wounded by the Church

Reading this in my current quest to explore the connection between trauma and church culture, I have found a book that is well-intentioned but fundamentally flawed.



Dave Burchett's *Bring 'Em Back Alive* gets a lot right. He is honest about how church can and has been a painful experience for many. He has a pastoral heart that yearns for the church to reach out to those so wounded. There is some helpful advice for those who care and some useful insights for those who have been hurt. But this book is far from the "healing plan" it is touted to be.

A defining image (page 13) in the book is of the "lost sheep", the one who has wandered, as opposed to the 99 who remain in the fold. He exhorts us to have the heart of the Good Shepherd who seeks out that one lost sheep. The image draws on Jesus' words in Matthew 18, of course, but it's a somewhat tortured connection with the parable. Not only does Burchett avoid a nuanced exposition, he misses the plain correlation between the lost sheep and the "little child" of Matthew 18:5 who "enters the kingdom of heaven." His use of *The Message* as his biblical text throughout severely restricts the depths from which he can draw.

It's a shame, because Matthew 18 can really help us in this

area. The wandering sheep is a “little” one, who exhibits a childlike faith. Jesus has just talked about the consequences for those who would cause such a “little one” to stumble, or sin, or wander. The dramatic image of a “millstone hung around the neck” and being drowned in the sea should give us pause for thought! It is a prophetic parable against those “who look down on one of these little ones” and has more implications for the character of the flock, than that of the little lamb.

And here lies Burchett’s problem. As he rightly appeals to church leaders to value those who have wandered away, he misses this prophetic trajectory against the existing flock, and therefore embraces some worrisome assumptions. I’ve tried to bluntly distill them here:

1. ***The point of reaching out to the wounded is to bolster the strength of the church.*** “How much depth have we, the collective church, lost by not aggressively seeking to find and heal our wounded lambs?” he asks on page 2, in the introduction. Somehow the utilitarian power of the wounding community has become the point.
2. ***The problem lies with those who have left.*** “So many people out there have been given up for lost,” he writes. “They could be found, healed, and returned. If we could only begin to communicate that we are willing to accompany them on the road back, forgive them, love them, and celebrate their return” (page 18). Frankly, this sentence made me angry. The subtitle of the book aims it at “those wounded by the church”, yet here it is the wounded ones that need to be “found”, “returned”, and “forgiven.” This is close to the language of an abusive husband, offering “reconciliation” because he is gracious enough to forgive his wounded wife.
3. ***People leave because of their immaturity.*** “Like a thirsty sheep, a bored and unfulfilled Christian who is without spiritual shepherding may wander onto paths that lead away from God.” (Page 36). Which is fine to say,

perhaps, if this is a book about being better shepherds. But it's not, and it infantilises those who have left and diminishes the principles (some of them dearly held) that shape that departure.

4. ***Unity trumps holiness and justice.*** "The Good Shepherd has a cure for us, and it starts with His prescription for unity." (Page 48). "Division within the body of Christ is sin. Jesus's teaching about unity is indissoluble." (Page 56). His words, in themselves, are not wrong. They are simply not careful enough. Again, he inadvertently echoes the words of an abusive husband insisting that marital unity is more important than any particular transgression on his part. Sometimes separation *is* necessary for unity. Even Paul (quoted by Burchett on page 53) exhorts Titus to have "nothing to do with" the (truly) divisive person. I know too many people who have appropriately departed their church community, and have then be shamed as divisive or schismatic, when the real wound to the body of Christ was done to them, not by them.

I've deliberately painted a stark image here, to make my point. Despite the flaws, Burchett *does* get to some helpful places.

The chapter entitled **The Heart of a Shepherd** is generally good. Occasionally he has the same sentiments as people like Mike Pilavachi who reimagines church as family. "Peter did not advise the shepherd to show difficult rams and ewes the sheep gate", Burchett writes (page 76), and I hear Pilavachi echoing "We don't have employees to hire and fire, but sons and daughters to raise." **Burchett's one clear point** is well made: We have a *responsibility to the wounded*(page 78), and we should take it seriously.

The second part of the book is also useful. It is actually aimed at those who have been hurt, rather than those who might seek them out. It's nothing groundbreaking, but it is good,

solid, stuff. He would turn our wounded eyes towards Jesus who “understands the pain, betrayal, and anguish that... selfish and sinful behavior causes” (page 117). He exhorts us towards forgiveness (page 180). He gives guidance about living in the present (page 153).

Occasionally, the era of the book shows. Published in 2004, it is just before the heyday of the emerging and emergent church movements. As he scratches on the disaffection of those in church who are “tired of pretending their lives are better than they actually are” (page 90), he has not yet seen the growth of movements that *did* arise from those who left that plastic world. Perhaps there is a glimpse of some generational wistfulness: “...they need to hear from their former flock that we care, we miss them, we need them, and we want them to come back” (Page 91). Having lived and led in that era, what we actually needed to hear was “that we care, we miss you, and we long for you to fly, and do, and build what that the Lord is leading you to do, we’ve got your back.”

I shook my head a little, when he talks about churches setting up classes and seminars for those wounded (by the same churches running the classes, presumably!), so that the “injured lambs” might not “feel alone... having a forum where they can express their hurt, and share their concerns.” I don’t think he realises how patronising that idea sounds.

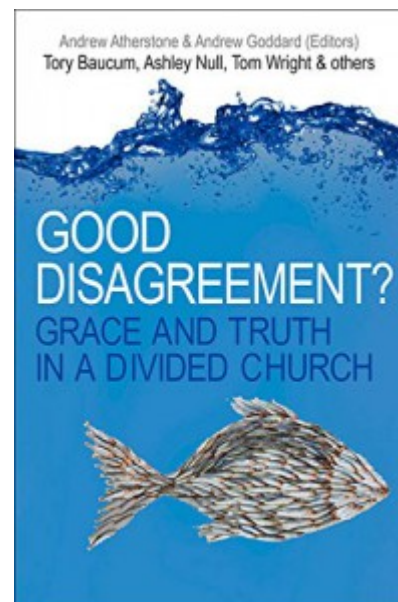
You see, in the end, the lost wounded sheep don’t want to be found by a hurtful church, even a regretful hurting church. I know this from my own experience. I know this because many of those I’ve met are wary of being found by *me*; I wear a clerical collar, I embody that which has been the source of their trauma. They don’t want to be found by us, **they want to be found by Jesus.** Yes, they also want community, but they want it real, spiritually authentic. Which means, Jesus first.

Helping the wounded isn’t about classes or offers of therapy. It’s not about technical change in tired institutions. It’s

not even about “revivals” of a surge of life into ordinary auditoriums. **It’s not our task to “bring ’em back alive.”** Yes, we follow Jesus as we search for them, care for them, breathe life into them, back them, cover them, and cheer them on. But it’s not about slotting them back in to where they were first injured. It’s about the Lord doing something new. When I meet the “little ones” who find no place at the institutional table, laden with looming millstones, I am increasingly realising that the kingdom of God belongs to those such as these.

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 some¹) 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

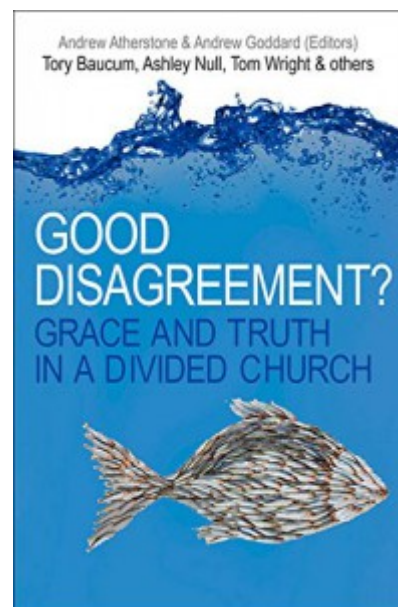
Footnotes:

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)

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.

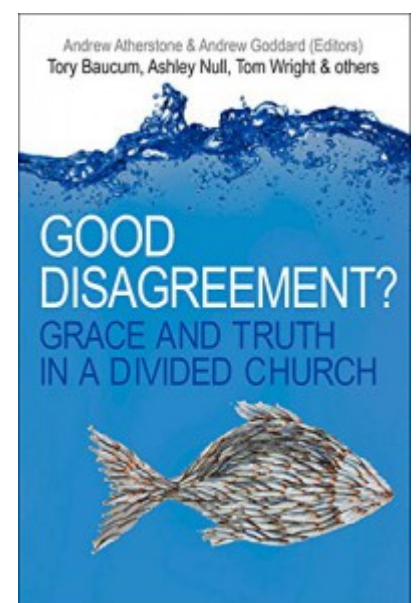
I could be wrong. In fact, I'm likely to be! These are initial observations only and still very much from an "outsider's" perspective. But if this is the case, then honesty about this is necessary for any good disagreement.

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

Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 1, Foreword

I have recently obtained a copy of *Good Disagreement? Grace and Truth in a Divided Church*. It is of current significance here in the Church of England as it informs and colours the contemporary debate about sexual ethics and gender identity in the Church. The ongoing *Shared Conversations* process is the current internal step for resolution, and the forthcoming meeting of the Primates in January 2016 is the last-gasp



step in the wider Anglican Communion, as it currently formally exists.

I have come to this book as someone with a deal of familiarity with the issues, but somewhat from afar. I have been following the debate since the touchstone issues of 2003 in The Episcopal Church (US). I have been involved in briefing senior figures in my former diocese with respect to the Windsor Report, Lambeth 2008, the development of the now effectively defunct Anglican Covenant, as well as the foment and formation of GAFCON and the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans.

But I am new to the Church of England and there appears to be a deal of difference here. By my (limited and recent) observation, the rhetoric is more precise, the politics are understated, and the balance between parochial and episcopal influence is more even. The different parties exist along the spectrum here (although the edges are fuzzier) and the ability to not encroach and to live and let live runs deep... until some of the things that are held in common are touched. And then it matters. Because those common things tend to be *core* things.

For better or for worse, sexual ethics and gender identity is core. And so the current conflict in my mind has three different outcomes; we discern what is “really core” and resolve to move differences to the periphery and walk together; we resolve differences and either reaffirm or adjust what is core, which remains common ground; we cannot resolve our differences, which remain core, and so we agree to walk apart on different ground. In my current mind I cannot conceive how the first of these is tenable, the second would take a miracle, and the third would be regretful. To that end I admire Archbishop Welby’s resolve to sail through these waters nevertheless. I am hoping that *Good Disagreement?* might help plot a chart. ++Justin writes in the Foreword:

Whether each side has much or little in common with one another, whether the outcome is unanimity or separation, it seems the only way to imitate Christ in our conflicts is to invest trust, love, and time in the people from whom we are currently divided.

Could we call that grace-filled realism? Perhaps it's just a long way of saying "speaking the truth in love", which cannot be *ad nauseum*, and does foresee an "outcome."

Unlike other book reviews that I provide here, I am not going to reflect after the fact. I am going to consider this book chapter by chapter; it is after all a series of essays. This book will be a journey for me, and I will reflect on the journey as we go. Bon voyage.

- 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
- Part 6: Good Disagreement and the Reformation by Ashley Null
- Part 7: Ecumenical (Dis)agreements by Andrew Atherstone and Martin Davie
- 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
- Part 10, Mediation and the Church's Mission by Stephen Ruttle