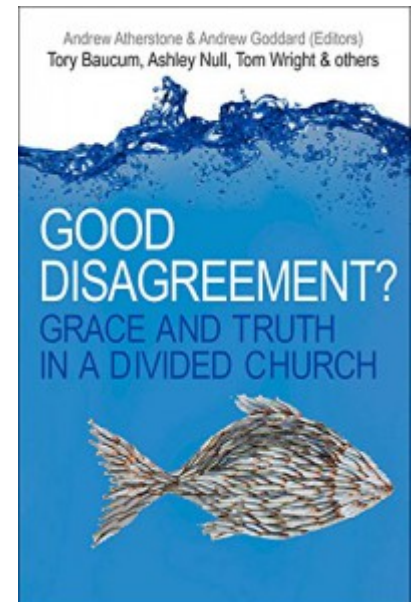


Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 3, Reconciliation in the New Testament

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)