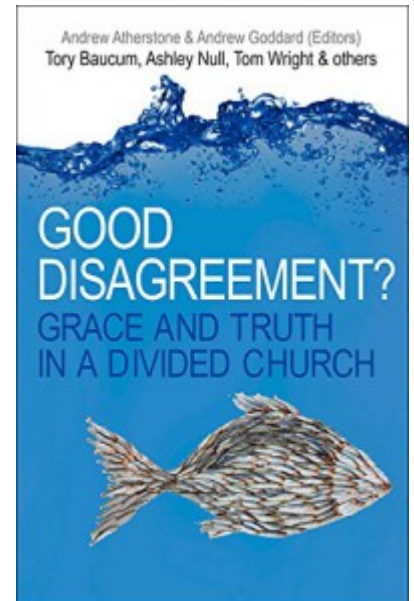


Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 4, Division and Discipline in the New Testament Church

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 is 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