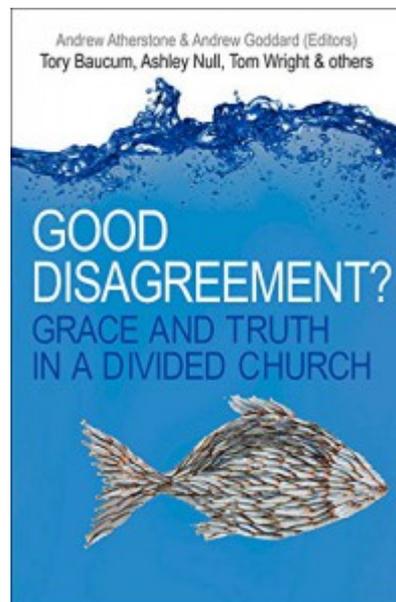


Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 6, Good Disagreement and the Reformation

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