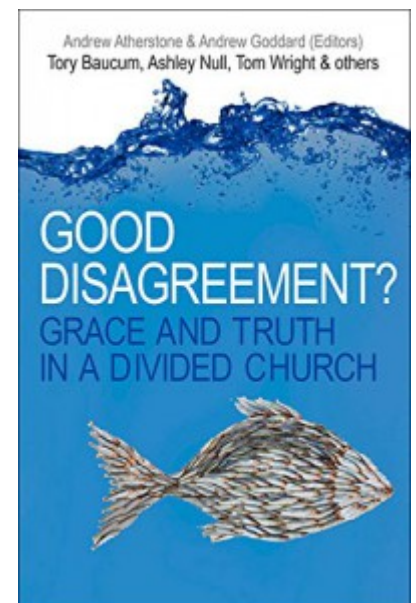


Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 2, Disagreeing with Grace

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