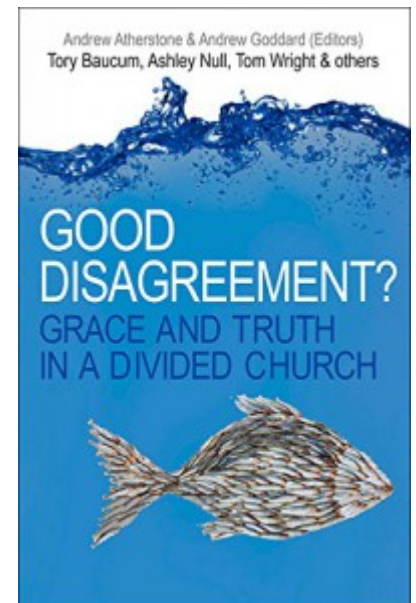


Review: Good Disagreement? Pt. 9 From Castles to Conversations & Ministry in Samaria

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
- 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

I've encountered the two most helpful chapters of this book. Both of them are personal experiences of good disagreement *in*

practice. Both of them bring a thorough grounding in the irenic gospel way. In one case there is agreement to disagree. In the other, structural and doctrinal separation occurs, but relational grace abounds.

The first chapter is **From Castles to Conversations** written by Lis Goddard and Clare Hendry who have been published as interlocutors on the question of female ordination. Here are two people from two sides of a very heartfelt theological fence, and they wrote a book together.

They also write this chapter together, in alternating sections in the first person. The characteristics that have come to the fore throughout the rest of this book – honesty, trust, vulnerability – are embodied here. But what is also clear is the foundation on which their gracious interaction stands: the authority of Scripture. They may disagree on how Scripture directs them, but they agree that it is the only place to look for direction. Goddard writes:

For us, good disagreement was based on mutual trust that the other person was open to the challenge of God in Scripture as we were. (p156)

They bring openness and honesty and incredible vulnerability. As Hendry points on on page 160, the implications for each of them if they were to change their mind would be immense! They were willing to risk that in honest engagement. They responded to each other fulsomely, and approached themselves with humility. This was human, spiritual, *devotional* engagement. Goddard writes again:

I can anticipate situations where I may conclude that someone is profoundly wrong, but I cannot anticipate circumstances where I would regret getting to know them, spending time listening, allowing myself to be challenged to return to Scripture and to my knees. (p161)

Writ large, this is the wonderful essence of *semper reformanda*. Honest conversation, constantly challenged to return to the Word of God in Scripture.

One would hope, therefore, that it can be quickly applied to the current troubles. But it can not be so readily applied, and not just because “every new issue we face is different because the layout of the ground is different” (p167).

Hendry and Goddard shared an epistemological common ground, a common view on *how* they would seek together, a covering that gave them protection, and direction.

In particular, and this is an instructive point for those leading the Shared Conversations, they realised that *experience*, even well-shared experience is not an adequate foundation for good disagreement. Hendry writes:

If we spoke only from our experience, and allowed that to be our authority for holding the positions we did, it would be unworkable. It closes down conversation, as we would either hold back from saying things because we didn't want to hurt each other or end up undermining each other. We needed a reference point from which we could evaluate what we both thought and believed, and that had to be God's word. Because we were both allowing our experience to come under its authority it was possible to be honest and vulnerable, to trust each other and properly engage and debate with each other. (pp156-157)

It's the epistemological question again. The common ground of “how do we know?”, “how do we seek?”, “how do we walk together?” remains tenuous in the current concerns about human sexuality. Both Goddard and Hendry hold a similar concern:

Lis: As we face new realities, we need to be clear what our baselines are, where we stand as we talk, how we disagree. Clare and I were able to come out of our castles and know the Bible was, for both of us, the central, key authority on

which we built everything else... If that priority is not held in common, then the ground shifts. (p167)

Clare: I would find it hard to work closely with someone whose teaching I believed to be unbiblical on central issues, such as denying the atonement, or undermining the uniqueness and divinity of Christ, or adopting a lifestyle rejected by Scripture. I could not in all good conscience say, "That's fine. You believe that and I will believe this, and it's all OK", if it was something that undermined the gospel. Equally, it would be hard to work closely with someone who did not take the authority of Scripture seriously. (p167)

Nevertheless, we are encouraged to not "stay in our groups", and reminded that "it does not mean that by engaging someone else's viewpoint we are necessarily condoning it" (p168). The reduced common ground in the current troubles may have a number of implications, including having "dividing well" as a possible constructive outcome and/or methodology. But what is needed, as is always the case, are people who know who they are, where they stand, and why, and who are able to genuinely **speak across the centre**, whether it be a simple scratch in the ground, or an impassable chasm.

The second chapter is from an American perspective of a church that has been through the painful process of departing the The Episcopal Church (TEC) in the US. Truro Anglican Church is now part of ACNA, was subject to litigation from TEC, and has subsequently lost ownership (but not use) of its property. Its a definitive story of the mess that was consequential to the events of 2003.

Tory Baucum, who is Rector of Truro (and a Canterbury Six Preacher), brings his ability to speak across the centre. He looks to the actions of Jesus in approaching the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 and explores it in some depth. The exegetical framework is intriguing and insightful,

wrapped up in the word “nuptial” (see p175) in which Jesus spiritually woos the woman towards covenantal renewal.

One could even say she is “Samaria incarnate”, divorced from her covenantal people and excluded in shame. Samaria itself is embodied in her multiple alienations (p176)

For the current purposes, Baucum expresses speaking across the centre as a willingness to do what Jesus did: to “enter Samaria” and offer grace before truth, to approach with *receptivity, humility and reciprocity* (p180).

There are also lessons from church history. His comparison of responses to post-Reformation conflict is helpful: Des Cartes who internalised faith, and De Sales who engaged with generous relationship (p184) across the Catholic-Reformed divide. It informs my current cross-cultural existence; I am learning that the natural British mode is so much more Cartesian than Salesian!

But in the end it is Baucum’s actions that make his lesson. Despite the litigious circumstances he explains how he reached out to his local Episcopal bishop in relationship. This relationship was reciprocated, and there have been grace-filled outcomes. It is instructive that this has not been dependent on reunion, and it wasn’t even dependent on the resolution of legal dispute! Truro Church remains structurally and doctrinally separate, but:

We are no longer a church at war with others, even though our commitment to orthodoxy is stronger and our standards of holiness are higher than during our days of division. We are not a church that simply wishes to cohabit with differences.

Instead we are a church that seeks to give life to our adversaries just as we do to our family and friends. The same gospel that teaches us marriage is the union of husband and wife in the bond of Christ’s love also teaches us to be peacemakers. (p192)

It's an excellent example, and an enlivening framework. It only raises one concern, and that is an implied paternalism.

The risk is this: to "enter Samaria" is to presuppose a somewhat asymmetrical situation: as the Jesus-figure, we offer grace and truth to the shame-ridden woman figure. That is, we speak with grace from a presumption of holding the truth. I suspect it would work if both parties came together with the same asymmetry, in balanced, opposite directions – but it could also be a barrier.

It is a similar dynamic to this: I know of a Christian leader who "entered Samaria" by genuinely engaging with a prominent gay activist. At one point, on a public stage, he felt led to give this activist an affirming hug. I understood the intention, but it could also have been taken as paternalistic: you are broken, you need a hug.

Baucum, Goddard and Hendry have ably demonstrated that it is possible to speak across the centre. It is something that is essential to good disagreement. But it's not simple, it does require trust on both sides, and with it being dependent on others, it runs the risk of failing. There are pitfalls, likely mistakes, and the risk of misinterpretation. The outcome may not be all that is hoped for. But it is necessary, and they have proved it in practice.

Next: Part 10, Mediation and the Church's Mission by Stephen Ruttle