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Good Disagreement?

by The Very Rev David Ison, Dean of St Paul's

Can different groups in the Church of England disagree but still live together? On one level that seems rather a nonsensical question: they've been doing it for centuries, with occasional upheavals and realignments, some of which make today's issues look minor (1662 expulsions of non-conformist ministers, the later Non-Jurors and the secession of the



Free Church of England come to mind). But it's a pressing question today about issues relating to gender and sexuality: and before reflecting on it further, it's worth recapitulating on where the (Pilling) House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality Report got to in 2014.

At the end of January 2014 the Church of England's [College of Bishops issued a statement](#) after its first reflections on the Pilling Report. Among other things, the statement referred to the need for facilitated conversations which would include 'profound reflection on the interpretation and application of Scripture' and 'safe space for all those involved to be honest about their own views and feelings', and noted that 'we recognise that we will not all agree and that this process is in part committed to seeking good disagreement that testifies to our love for one another across the church in obedience to Christ.' These objectives were clarified by the Bishop of Sheffield in a General Synod document in June 2014 as follows.

'The proposal for conversations has two objectives, both with a focus on the church's mission. One is to enable the Church of England to reflect, in the light of scripture, on the implications of the immense cultural change that has been taking place. It is common ground that social attitudes have changed extremely rapidly. Because of our calling to present the gospel afresh in every generation, a changing context always raises new questions about our missional stance toward culture. Clarifying how we can most effectively be a missionary church in a changing culture around sexuality is a key objective.

'The other objective is to clarify the implications of what it means for the Church of England to live with what the Archbishop of Canterbury has called "good disagreement" on these issues. There is no expectation of achieving any consensus – in either direction – in the foreseeable future. But there is a task to be done of encouraging those within the church who are at odds on this issue to express their concerns in a safe environment, listen carefully to those with whom they disagree profoundly, find something of Christ in each other and consider together what the practical consequence of disagreement might be. From New Testament times the church of Christ has had to face disagreement. Fashioning our life as a church includes finding ways to "disagree Christianly".'

Those [Shared Conversations](#) began in the College of Bishops in September, and will continue in 12 regional groups ending with a further process at General Synod in July 2016. The conservative evangelical group [Reform issued a statement](#) dated 6th October 2014 which claimed that the objectives of the conversations had been widened: this was however denied by the College of Bishops as being a misinterpretation of the statement about their conversations. Reform called on its members to boycott the process of conversations, on the basis that the teaching of Scripture and the Church was already clear, and to imply otherwise meant forcing participants to ‘accept an outcome in which the Church moves from its present, biblical, understanding of marriage to one where we accommodate two separate beliefs, with one part of the Church calling for repentance over sexual sin and another declaring God’s blessing. This is tantamount to asking us to accept a redefinition of what will and will not lead to salvation – as though there could be two gospels, equally valid.’

There have been a number of ways of responding to Reform’s view. One is to explore the ways in which scriptural interpretation, church doctrine and ethics has varied over the centuries and between evangelicals, including in differing attitudes towards marriage, divorce, contraception and gender relations. Although this illuminates the ways in which past and present cultures influence what Christians believe (on all sides), it doesn’t usually change the mindset that the current sectarian evangelical cultural definition of what is scriptural, and church teaching where compatible with this, is absolute. It does however among other things call into question Reform’s statement that ‘the Church’ has a ‘present, biblical understanding of marriage’, when Reform itself is looking for a conservative evangelical bishop who accepts the ‘complementarian view’ of gender relations, which in itself acknowledges that the Church has different views about the nature of marriage. There is already diversity in the Church’s views, which is what allows Reform to remain within the Church while arguing that many of their fellow Christians – defined as those who follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour – are being false to the gospel and should be outside it.

Another response to Reform is to question the underlying monolithic view of belief, that a particular view of one aspect of moral teaching is required in order to be orthodox at all, and that those not sharing this view actually believe in a different gospel (see the quote above) – an ‘all or nothing’ view of Christian truth. Ever since St Paul began to pursue the logic of St Peter’s experience in Caesarea (Acts 10-11), the Church has grappled with questions around gospel and culture: how is salvation through faith in Christ to be worked out in practical moral behaviour in different societies, and what room is there for different interpretations?

Underlying Reform’s response is the view described, in journalistic fashion, by [Andrew Brown in his blog](#)

‘...the real sticking point for Reform was the hope expressed by the bishops at their most recent meeting, “for the Church of England to live together as a family who disagree with one another.” They are Calvinists. They don’t want to live together with people who disagree with them – to be “yoked with unbelievers”, as St Paul put it. You can laugh at their demand not to be called “homophobic”, although it would be a small thing to grant them. You can laugh, too, at the gloriously unrealistic demand that the church spend millions in

legal battles with the equality law. What is non-negotiable, though, is the group's demand that the church deal with disagreement on this matter by expelling its opponents. It's certainly a popular demand – on both sides. But it is the one thing against which the archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has set his face. What he wants is “good disagreement”. For Reform – and, to be fair, for its opponents – what's good about disagreement is the moment when the enemy crumbles.’

And in the light of Reform's response, there are also questions to be asked about the whole enterprise of ‘Shared Conversations’. Reflection ‘in the light of scripture’ brings in two of the classical Anglican markers of theological authority, the Bible and Reason, to which should be added an awareness of and exploration of Tradition – which requires a serious engagement with history which is not necessarily present in the heat of the debate. Further, the idea that there can be ‘safe space’ and a ‘safe environment’ for people to be vulnerable about their sexuality could only be true where those with power relinquish it. How reasonable is it to expect gay ordained and lay people, in a Church which discriminates against and condemns the expression of their sexuality, in a wider British culture which only very recently has begun to be more open about sexuality and where homophobic bullying and even murder are still current, let alone a world-wide culture in which homosexuality is in many places punished by imprisonment or death, should make themselves vulnerable to those who may want to exclude them? Will heterosexuals begin the discussion by sharing their struggles and experiences with their own sexuality, including those of their sins and shortcomings which might open them to the charge of hypocrisy, the loss of their reputation and authority, and possible disciplinary action? After all, far more damage is done in and to the Church by misbehaving heterosexuals than by gay people.

Personally, I think that the idea of ‘Shared Conversations’ is a positive initial step, but one which is unlikely on its own to have the kind of buy-in which is necessary to make a sufficient difference to how the Church engages with the issues around sexuality. A process which requires its participants to truly hear, and even be vulnerable to, one another, requires rather more investment of time and will than appears likely to be given at present through what is proposed for these conversations: they are a beginning rather than an end – which is one of the reasons why Reform are reluctant to participate, as they imply more beyond them. But, as the group discussions in General Synod about the ordination of women as bishops helped participants to really begin to meet those with whom they disagree, so these conversations have the power to do the same: whether that leads to change, and what that change would be, will be a further question.

So is the Church of England doomed to separation by those who believe that their integrity demands it? Will ‘conservative evangelicals’ and ‘dogmatic liberals’ inevitably see each other as ‘the enemy’ and go different ways, not recognising one other as validly Christian, but at best as imperfectly Christian? Or are there other ways in which the project to encourage ‘good disagreement’ might develop, perhaps more along the lines of the Five Principles for mutual flourishing in a church which has women bishops, rather than following the example of the secession of the Ordinariate?

There are other resources to help with the pursuit of 'good disagreement'. One comes from experience of engagement in ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue: it's the principle that we should engage with the best of another's tradition and view, rather than score points by looking for where ideals fall short. It's a corporate version of 'do as you would be done by': so, rather than trading horror stories about churches persecuting gay people or the prejudices of liberals, we seek to understand the positive virtues of those we disagree with, and look to define our own position by what we affirm more than what we deny. That doesn't mean avoiding hard truths and points of disagreement, but it means beginning with our acknowledgement that, as fallible human beings, we don't always get it right.

My experience of inter-faith dialogue at its best is that sharing on this level allows us to be honest about what we really find hard about one another's belief and practice, in a setting in which it can be heard and can challenge the participants to respond appropriately, to pursue the best in our own traditions and appreciate the insights of others. That's the great shame about Reform refusing to meet in dialogue – which doesn't mean giving up what you hold dear, but enabling others and yourself to understand it more deeply, in the context of relationship with God and others. To withdraw from dialogue means to deny our own fallibility and our need to find God in others, as well as the opportunity to share with them the gift of our experience of God. Withdrawal means, to use the words of the Bishops, the failure to 'find something of Christ in each other': the in-practice denial that you have anything to learn from others, and indeed the refusal to see the other as truly Christian.

That theme of our inescapable relatedness to others as Christians – including those with whom we disagree – is reflected in St Paul's treatment of the question of how we should disagree as Christian disciples. One important passage here is Romans 14-15, reflecting 1 Corinthians 8, which is principally about eating meat in the context of the offering of animals to pagan deities, and how converts to Christian faith may be endangered by apparent compromise with idolatry. Idolatrous worship is not at the heart of Christian disagreements about sexuality, but the principles to which Paul appeals are relevant. He recognises that Christians will have different views; that we must not judge one another, as each of us is accountable to God; that we must be convinced in our own minds that what we ourselves do is for the honour of the Lord; that we should pursue peace, harmony and mutual building-up, and not cause our sisters and brothers to fall away from God, but welcome one another in Christ's name. These principles apply to all, of course: Paul's strong/weak dichotomy can be read both ways, and it's worth reading the passage through from both perspectives, i.e. seeing those who discriminate against gay people and women, and those who do not, as in turn 'the strong' and 'the weak' – not least because a minority will tend to cast itself in the role of the 'weak' and so be blind to its own power over others. What we do and believe affects each other as Christians, and that needs acknowledging and owning – from both perspectives – if we are to live together as Paul urges us to.

Another passage which engages with disagreement is 1 Corinthians 11.2ff, where Paul argues against the Corinthians that women should cover their heads in church when they pray. His invocations of headship, male authority, women's subordination to men, length of hair and what nature teaches rely on a set of cultural and theological assumptions which are either particular to

his setting or conflict with other scriptural principles (not only for example Galatians 3.28, but even within the passage itself in verses 11-12). At the end of the section, Paul quotes the practice of other churches as his final authority, recognising implicitly the weakness of his argument. In the following section on the abuse of the agape/Eucharist he is much clearer about his authority for condemning the Corinthians' practice; in treating the head-covering issue his approach leaves room for disagreement. This is an example of how scripture itself engages with debate; and the Church of England along with many other Christian churches has for a long time regarded Paul's argument as culturally specific and not universally binding, and has not found in its experience that the failure of women to 'have authority on their heads' has been a particular problem for worship or evangelism.

Whether or not our human and Christian experience is to be counted alongside scripture, tradition and reason as a source of authority, it does provide a crucial testing-ground for truth. Does what we believe bear in people's lives the fruits of the Gospel of Christ? That's another of the principles of Paul in his letters: read Galatians 5.11-26 as one whole passage, and from the different perspectives represented in the church then and now. One group or another may claim parts of this passage for themselves: but who is free enough to love and serve those with whom they disagree, in Christ, and not engage in enmity, dissension, faction and the like? The thoroughgoing nature of what Paul calls us to is not for the faint-hearted: it is radical love, which challenges us all, wherever we come from. And when we look at our lives and those of others, what bears the fruits of the Spirit? How are our beliefs expressed in greater wholeness and healing, in loving service and prophetic witness, in transformation into the image of Jesus Christ?

To take a similar issue, one of the ways in which the ordination of women as priests and now bishops has been understood is as a 'process of reception' by the wider Church. Indeed, Anglican holy orders for men have still not been received by the historic Western and Eastern Churches, and that involves all of us living in the tension of disagreement. The same can be true, if we will, for those who agree and disagree with the validity of committed same-sex relationships for Christians: let us allow one another our integrity, in the name of Jesus Christ, and see what fruits it bears in the lives of followers of Christ and in our mission to the world in Christ's name. One of the main things which changed my inherited prejudices towards women in leadership and gay people was and continues to be my observation of the kind of fruit that God has borne in their lives, and that which has come from those who oppose them. I have seen and heard of so much pain and spiritual destruction that has come out of the Church's refusal to embrace the equality of women and gay people before God, and from its refusal to accept the reality of its own discrimination against people for who they are.

I'm very conscious in all this that the conversation about 'good disagreement' is one which in essence is conducted in theory and by those with power: it is a patronising conversation. Take an issue of justice on which the whole Church, at least nominally if not always in practice, agrees: the equality of all people irrespective of race or ethnicity. The Church still struggles with how to affirm in practice people of black and minority ethnic and Jewish backgrounds: but if we were to be discussing the question of whether or not they are equal before God, we would rightly be condemned for our racism or anti-Semitism, even though such prejudices have been scripturally justified in Christian history. Why then do we think it still acceptable in parts of the Church to speak

about and treat women and gay people as a 'them', as a problem to work around rather than as a part of our own Christian body? The reference to women as 'equal but complementary' among some evangelicals is in reality an evasion of equality to justify not treating them as equal in ministry and leadership. The view that gay people are only acceptable as long as they do not express who and what they are, and do not know an intimacy which heterosexual people take for granted, is only justifiable in its inhumanity by seeing gay people as them, not us.

'Good disagreement' on this reading is a way of damping down dissent and failing to engage with the uncomfortable truths of a God who, as we declare, is a God of love. Of course that doesn't mean that God does not challenge – all of us – to loving and holy living. But do we dare to say that God discriminates against some of us, because of what we are – what in the experience of gay people and women is what they or you or we are, not what I or she or you choose to be? The process of seeking for 'good disagreement' must, if it is to be just and true, include a commitment to affirming the honesty and humanity of Christian gay people, and have the aim of ending institutionalised discrimination in the Church against women and gay people as well as against BME and disabled people. Where is their voice, and how is power to be shared between all God's people? St Paul spoke of being 'all things to all people' in order to share the gospel, but this didn't include collusion with those who, by following the Law, threatened to undermine the freedom of Christians in Christ. When does 'good disagreement' collude with injustice and not set people free?

Two final thoughts. One of the issues underlying fears about the acceptance of same-sex relationships is how 'Christian' these would be, a fear fuelled by the deviancy of some underground homosexual behaviour (noting the double standard around deviant heterosexuality). An important part of a 'good disagreement' project should be work, primarily by LGBT people but including Christians of different sorts, on what faithful gay, bisexual and transgender Christian living should look like in moral practice. Civil partnership has given a way for celibate gay mutual commitment to be supported and affirmed. We need to consider what the acceptance of same-sex marriage in the Church would mean in reality, and how it would be understood in relation to the theology of Christian marriage and the chequered history of that institution, as well as contemporary social practice around sexuality. Christian gay people have to cope with both the disapproval of their own churches and the contempt of an outside world that thinks Christianity has nothing positive to say on gay relationships: how can we change that, together?

And a final resource in more ways than one for our conversations is that of eschatology, our understanding of 'the last things'. In my view the most fundamental thing which Jesus says about sex is in Matthew 22.30: that there is no marriage in the resurrection. That means that all of us will get past sex one day: we are all as Christians growing into a love in the kingdom of heaven which is truly inclusive, where we can love all more deeply than we are learning to love our significant other – and if a marriage, partnership or friendship doesn't share love with others beyond itself, it isn't about love at all. Unlike the man who asks for directions only to be told 'don't start from here', Christ can lead us home wherever we start from: and as we get closer to God in Christ, so we grow more like one another.

To be a Christian is to follow Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives, to become more and more Jesus-shaped people who love God and our neighbour. If we can have the generosity to accept that all of us are work in progress, and that the words of Jesus in Matthew chapter 7 do really apply to each of us, then we may have room in our hearts and in our Church's life for a good and generous disagreement which allows us actually to be different and to act different, and to pursue truth, love and justice in a way which challenges powerfully the world around us as well as our life with one another.

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February 2015*

