



Disagreement and Grace

A 'Feature' paper from www.cte.org.uk

This is a paper from the Archbishop of Canterbury for Churches Together in England.

It is an edited transcript from the National Church Leaders meeting at Lambeth Palace 7/10/13

It is provided to aid discussion, prayer and planning for local groups of churches.



I want to say four things about graciousness and respect in disagreement. The first one is that disagreement is a reality; and when we deny that, ignore it, avoid it, pretend it's not true, everything goes badly wrong. We all know that in a household or a community or a marriage if someone is looking sulky or saying very little, and you know there's something wrong and they won't tell you, it doesn't help. When we look at the New Testament we see division and disagreement at every possible opportunity. Look at the beginning of both of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, the first chapter of each of them. In 1

Corinthians he talks about a church entirely divided by people following one person or another; and in 2 Corinthians he talks about being in despair because things were so bad. In Philippians, he calls for reconciliation between two members of the Church – and remember this was in the days when there was no good communication, and yet from a great distance he'd heard the row, and he knew there was something wrong and he had to deal with it. In the Gospels, we see the apostles and the disciples arguing about who is the most important, right up to almost immediately before the crucifixion. They waste all their energy on disagreements.

The Church has historically always found it easy to divide, and we still do. And the issues which cause division are sometimes represented as principled issues, issues of theology – which is true; or they may be issues around discrimination against one group of the Church or another. I often think about the fact that in the 1960s when Afro-Caribbean people first came to this country they were not made welcome in our churches. It's the reality; it was a sin, a very bad sin.

Division is a reality. Most of our divisions come down to issues of power and prestige. We dress them up in smart clothes around dogma and disagreement over doctrine; but at the very heart of them is very often a failure to be able to talk to each other, to communicate with humility that enables us to hear what the other one is saying.

I'm an Archbishop; I know about the absence of humility. I struggle with it. Sometimes it's about money, but it all comes back to Jesus's parable of taking the best seats at the feast. Power and prestige; they get under our skin.

We need first of all to recognise that we will disagree, we disagree, and therefore we need to be prepared and thoughtful about what is involved in disagreement. It is a reality.

Secondly, there is the question of reaction to disagreement.

We need to start by recognising we are family. The reaction must be from within the knowledge that, not by our choice but by the will of God, we belong to each other. To put it crudely and in an unsophisticated way, as the saying goes: 'you can choose your friends, but you're stuck with your family.' And my brothers and sisters, I hate to tell you this but I'm family with you, and by the Lord's grace, through the work of the cross, we are going to be in heaven forever. So we'd better start getting used to each other, because we're stuck with each other permanently.

That's the work of God. It's not our option to say, 'well we can go off and not be family.' We are always family.

Thirdly, our response to division. And this is where grace comes in. Transparency is an element of grace, because of course God in his grace to us is transparent. He doesn't say, 'well, I don't really mind about sin'. He says, 'I hate sin but I've given a remedy'. We know where we stand with God; there's no messing about. Having reacted, how do we respond? One thing I want to say, and I've learnt this in Africa as much as anywhere, is we need to act to be gracious. Sometimes you have to do things in order to become them. If we're going to be gracious, act graciously. Whatever's in your heart, act graciously – and the grace of God will often transform our hearts so as we act graciously we become gracious.

There's a well-known story of Corrie ten Boom, the extraordinary Dutch evangelist and missionary. She was in her middle age, in her 50s, when the Second World War broke out. Her family sheltered Jewish refugees in Holland. They were betrayed by a collaborator, they were taken away to a concentration camp in Germany. Her whole family, apart from her, was killed; every single member. And after the war they were in Ravensbruck a really terrible camp, and after the war she was lecturing in Germany on forgiveness, and she gave her lecture and at the end she saw a man pushing his way to the front to come and talk to her. And she recognised him: he'd been one of the cruellest guards in Ravensbruck; he had tortured and beaten and assaulted and raped. He'd done terrible, terrible things. And he pushed towards her and – he didn't recognise her – he said to her: 'I was a guard in a concentration camp; I did terrible things. After the war, I found the Lord Jesus and he has forgiven me. I know you were in a concentration camp (she hadn't said where), will you forgive me?' And she said that in her heart was just hatred, but she stretched out her hand (I remember hearing her say this) and took it, and as she did so she felt the Holy Spirit dissolve the hatred in her heart and enable her to say with a full heart: 'I forgive you'.

Now, forgiveness is not often that simple – let's be clear, it may take decades, generations sometimes, we need to be honest about that. But we need to act in order to be. And when we disagree with each other there are moments when we need to act to be. We need to act to be. . . We need to pray so we can act. . . One of the top priorities for my time as Archbishop is a renewal of prayer and the religious life, the communities of prayer, without which there will be no renewal of the spiritual life in this land. . .

Finally, reconciliation. Reconciliation between us as human beings is not agreement – it is learning to love one another in deep disagreement. That is genuine reconciliation. It is being different. God is so wonderful, we are so different. The miracle of the church is not that we agree and love one another; it's that we disagree and, despite that, we love one another. That's the miracle that the Holy Spirit brings. So what happens when we're reconciled, when we demonstrate diversity in love? When we demonstrate that, we're straight into the last seven or eight verses of John 17. And the world will see that Jesus is the Son of God, and they will believe. . .

But reconciliation – I can tell you this after many years of working on it, both in myself and professionally in war zones around the world – comes with two s's: service and sacrifice. If we're going to have reconciliation, if we're going to have graciousness and respect in disagreement, there has to be sacrifice. It is always costly to be reconciled. Within the catholic tradition I've learnt over the last ten years about the great sacrament of reconciliation: confession. It is enormously powerful and hideously painful when it's done properly. . . It's really horrible when you go to see your confessor – I doubt you wake up in the morning and think, this is going to be a bunch of laughs. It's really uncomfortable. But through it God releases forgiveness and absolution and a sense of cleansing, a sense of knowing that we belong to him, that we're his children. And if we're to be reconciled to each other in CTE and across the church, and to see people come to faith and be disciples of Jesus Christ and to live out the transformation of our society to one of justice . . . we will see justice when we see a church that is alive in Christ and is calling with great power in the service of Christ. . . But that will take great sacrifice.

So, graciousness and respect in disagreement: the reality, the reaction, the response, the reconciliation - that we may maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Note

This reflection was offered in the National Church Leaders meeting when Bishop Eric Brown was appointed to serve as a Pentecostal President of Churches Together in England alongside those from Church of England, Roman Catholic, Free Church, Lutheran and Orthodox traditions.

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