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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

REVIEW ARTICLE: LIVING RECONCILIATION

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LIVING RECONCILIATION

Phil Groves and Angharad Parry Jones

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‘Reconciliation is good news in a world of fear and alienation,’ Archbishop Justin Welby writes in the preface to this book, and the anecdotal evidence given here supports the view. I am certainly glad that there are people who want to see communities reconciled to each other, in a move away from violence and revenge. It is a very difficult and painful work that seems to have brought peace to many communities. ‘I believe that living reconciliation can transform our world,’ Archbishop Welby also says, and perhaps he is right. From gang warfare in California to the denial of water rights in the Kalahari, it seems that the process described in this book as ‘Living Reconciliation’ does change people’s lives for the better.

However, this book has a grander claim than that. Reconciliation, the authors write, is not only at the heart of Anglicanism, but at the heart of the gospel itself. Indeed, ‘it is the gospel’ (p. 9). This is God’s mission, the story of the Bible. 2 Cor 5:17–19 and Col 1:19–20 are amongst the verses quoted to support this claim. God reconciles us, sinful humans, to himself in Christ Jesus. As a result of that, societies and individuals at war can be marvellously transformed, and peace and relationship can exist where previously there was enmity.

So, the book goes on, Christians should be involved in Living Reconciliation: overcoming the differences that divide peoples. How? Through the Indaba process, a process of meeting together, sharing hospitality, and listening to each other as we talk through our differences and learn to understand each other. As we do that, as we see communities transformed, and as we ‘bring peace into a world scarred by violence,’ then ‘we are participating in the mission of God throughout the world’ (p. 156).

Just a minute. Didn’t we start with reconciliation in the gospel? Reconciliation between God and sinners who would otherwise go to hell? Why have we stopped at the admirable, but temporary, goal of reconciliation between divided human communities?

God has a more ambitious plan. He wants to save souls, and he has sent his Son to die that sinners might be reconciled to him. It was achieved, not by God talking to us and coming to understand and accept our sin, but at the terrible cost of the death of his Son, paying for that sin. He has, moreover, given us the marvellous privilege of participating in his plan by

taking his message of salvation to others. We have that opportunity to see people reconciled to God, at peace with him. *This* is his mission.

It is the confusion between these two visions—the good, if limited, one of human reconciliation, and God’s plan of eternal reconciliation with him—that underpins Grove and Parry Jones’ book. They *start* at the right place, with Scripture that talks of reconciliation at the heart of the gospel. But reconciliation between whom and whom? And how is it achieved?

If we are talking about reconciliation between warring parties, or victims and abusers, or communities estranged by inequality and injustice, then it seems that the Living Reconciliation, the way of life based on the Indaba process, has a lot to recommend it. Of course this is largely a book based on anecdote, but I have no reason to think they are lying about the success of the reconciliation process as they have observed it. What a loving thing for Christians to be engaged in.

The problem arises when this mission of reconciliation between estranged humans is mistaken for Christ’s mission of reconciliation between God and sinful humanity. Yet this slide in meaning, between the reconciliation that the Bible speaks of, and the reconciliation between human groups that all the anecdotal examples speak of, is endemic to the book.

It is this fundamental confusion that lies behind the other problems in advocating the Indaba process as a solution to the Church of England’s disagreements. It may be very effective in bringing warring African parties together, and goodness knows that is no small achievement. May it continue and flourish. The Indaba process, however, is no way for establishing theological truth. Indeed, for all the references to ‘speaking truth in love,’ there is very little of speaking truth—at least truth that might confront—of any sort in this book: just of listening and acceptance.

1. Did Jesus really command us to live out Living Reconciliation?

The logic of the book’s argument seems to be: Jesus tells us to be loving and listen, in his teaching and by his example. Therefore that is what Christians should do. In doing so, we create loving communities, are a witness to the world, and continue Jesus’ mission.

Now, it is true Jesus commands us to be loving towards each other as Christians. That will mark us out as Christians. But what makes us Christians? Not our loving behaviour, but being saved by Christ, repenting and believing. We are saved first by believing the truth, and being saved we then love one another. It does not work the other way around. The loving and accepting community is the result, the wonderful side effect, not the cause.

Yet in this book, we are told that reconciling human communities to each other is the entirety of what Jesus calls us to do. '[Jesus] spoke with many who were not his people, separated by gender and ethnic barriers, and he was abused and rejected by his own people. This is the journey he called his companions to follow him on, and journey he calls us all to participate in' (p. 29). Really? The Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20)—which does not appear anywhere in this book—would disagree. Yes, Jesus would have us speak with those who are not our people, separated by barriers—but what he would have us speak is the message of his death and resurrection, making disciples and teaching people to obey his commands. We are to call upon listeners, as Peter did, to understand and then to repent (Acts 2). The same Peter who, when he was wrong, was called by Paul to repent and change his mind and actions (Gal 2:11–14). The same Peter whom Christ himself called Satan when he had the wrong idea about what Jesus was doing (Mark 8:33).

2. What else did Jesus command?

We have wonderful examples in this book of people who refused to abuse authority, who gave up their power to serve others (for example in chapter 4). These are examples of people taking Jesus' teaching seriously and obeying it. But we cannot take the Jesus who challenges power and tells us to serve, while ignoring the Jesus who, for instance, defends marriage as between one man and one woman. Moreover, Jesus did not command us to decide how to live and run our churches based on listening to everyone else's experiences. He told us to base it on his word, his teaching and ethical commands, as conveyed by his Apostles whom the Spirit led into truth. In other words, we can't pick and choose which bits of Jesus' commands to obey.

Listening to each other is important. Understanding difference is a crucial part of resolving conflict. However, God says some differences *matter*. There are some issues for which there is a right and a wrong answer. He gives us his word to set the standard. Agreeing on what God has said can be difficult, and indeed we need patience in community to do so. However what that community is meant to be doing is listening, not just to each other, but to God. Where does Scripture speak to the Indaba process?

3. Listen to each other, or listen to Scripture?

Ah, the authors answer, Scripture is centre stage. *Lectio divina* is part of the Continuing Idaba Conversations. The process is described for us:

1. One individual reads a passage slowly.
2. Each person identifies the word or phrase that catches their attention (1 minute).
3. Each shares the word or phrase around the groups (3–5 minutes, no discussion).
4. Another person reads the passage slowly (from a different translation if possible).
5. Each person identifies where this passage touches their life today (1 minute).
6. Each shares (3–5 minutes, no discussion).
7. Passage is read a third time (another reader and translation, if possible. Or even another language.)
8. Each person names or writes: ‘From what I’ve heard and shared, what do I believe God wants me to do or be? Is God inviting me to change in any way?’ (5 minutes)
9. Each shares their answer (5–10 minutes, no discussion)
10. Each prays for the person on their right, naming what was shared in other steps (5 minutes). (pp. 136–7; this study is begun and finished in prayer).

While it is commendable that Scripture is included, those of us who have been involved in serious Bible study can only be incredulous. Around thirty minutes of comment, with no discussion? Remaining at the level of what ‘catches my attention’ or ‘touches my life’? Never asking—what does the passage *say*? What is its argument, its conclusion, its context? What is the author teaching? This is not a process by which Scripture is listened to and obeyed. This is not a process which encourages us to listen to God and submit to him.

4. After we listen—what then?

Yet, it seems, the Indaba process is very useful for overcoming differences and reconciling people and communities. There are no examples here of the process failing. Yet is this realistic? Sometimes listening and understanding leads to the point where parties can see that their differences are, in fact, irreconcilable. What then?

Take, for instance, the example given of Rob, a gay man working in a Californian diocese. He came to be friends with Gervas from Tanzania, who did not believe being gay and being Christian could go together. Through discussions ranging over the displacement of Indigenous Americans by white settlers and the exclusion felt by gay people from society, Rob and Gervas came to a closer relationship of acceptance.

Gervas and the other Tanzanians did not ‘change their minds’ on the legitimacy of gay unions. They were not converted by the story, but they began to understand that they had a brother, who was gay, walking with Christ’ (p. 112–13).

Well, what then? Did Rob’s brothers in Christ, seeing their brother in sin, try to restore him gently, which is precisely what the Bible tells us someone who is truly spiritual will do (Gal 6:1)? If not, what has the Indaba process achieved, other than a good feeling while consciences are seared? While Rob continues to walk in disobedience to his Lord?

But here we come to what, it seems, the authors truly believe. They do not think that Rob is in disobedience; only those who refuse to listen to him are. The diocese that is praised as an example to follow in the final chapter, is not one where God’s word is faithfully preached, but one under a female Bishop who has made sure this Indaba-type process of Living Reconciliation is in practice. It is, also, the diocese where Rob, the gay man, works with gangs, reconnecting youth to the community, working with all church denominations and other parties. ‘In some ways,’ we are told, ‘it does not matter what is actually done in these partnerships’—examples being football, computers, art shows, and cleaning up beaches. ‘It doesn’t matter so long as the energy for action comes from within the community itself and so long as it builds mutual confidence’ (p. 143). *It does not matter?* Where is Christ here?

Other examples follow, church communities living out Living Reconciliation. This is, we are told, ‘what it means to imitate Christ together.’ This is, we are told, what Paul calls for in Philipians 2. It is what, we are told, will bring us to sing with Charles Wesley:

Changed from glory into glory
till in heaven we take our place
Till we cast our crowns before thee
Lost in wonder love, and praise. (p. 159)

No. Sadly, it is not. Living Reconciliation will probably improve lives, but only teaching people the word of Christ will bring them to glory. People may be wonderfully reconciled—there is much of this language in the final chapter—but where is the language of salvation? Without repentance and belief in Christ, they will *not* take their place in heaven. What is done *does* matter.

So what are we to conclude? There are fundamental disagreements within the Church of England, and certainly listening to each other will help us understand each other’s position better. But what will come of this process?

Well, let us take the imperatives of this book seriously.

1. If the Church of England truly holds to what this book encourages—that all viewpoints must be listened to and accepted; that power must be shared; that everyone must have their own voice (p.59); then increase the number of conservative, complementarian bishops. Do not marginalise or oppress the conservative voice.

Or, even more profoundly:

2. If the Church of England truly holds to what this book says about Scripture—that it must be listened to, that Jesus in his teaching and example must be followed, then do so. Follow *all* of Jesus' teaching, and that of his Apostles, not just the selective examples given here. Take Scripture at its word. Teach clergy to understand, expound, and preach Scripture. Endorse in word, method, and practice that Scripture is the authority for our theological conclusions and actions. Live this out.

Then conflict can be transformed. *Then* we will participate in the mission of God throughout the world. *Then* the transforming power of the Spirit of Christ will be felt, in our churches and beyond into our communities.

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